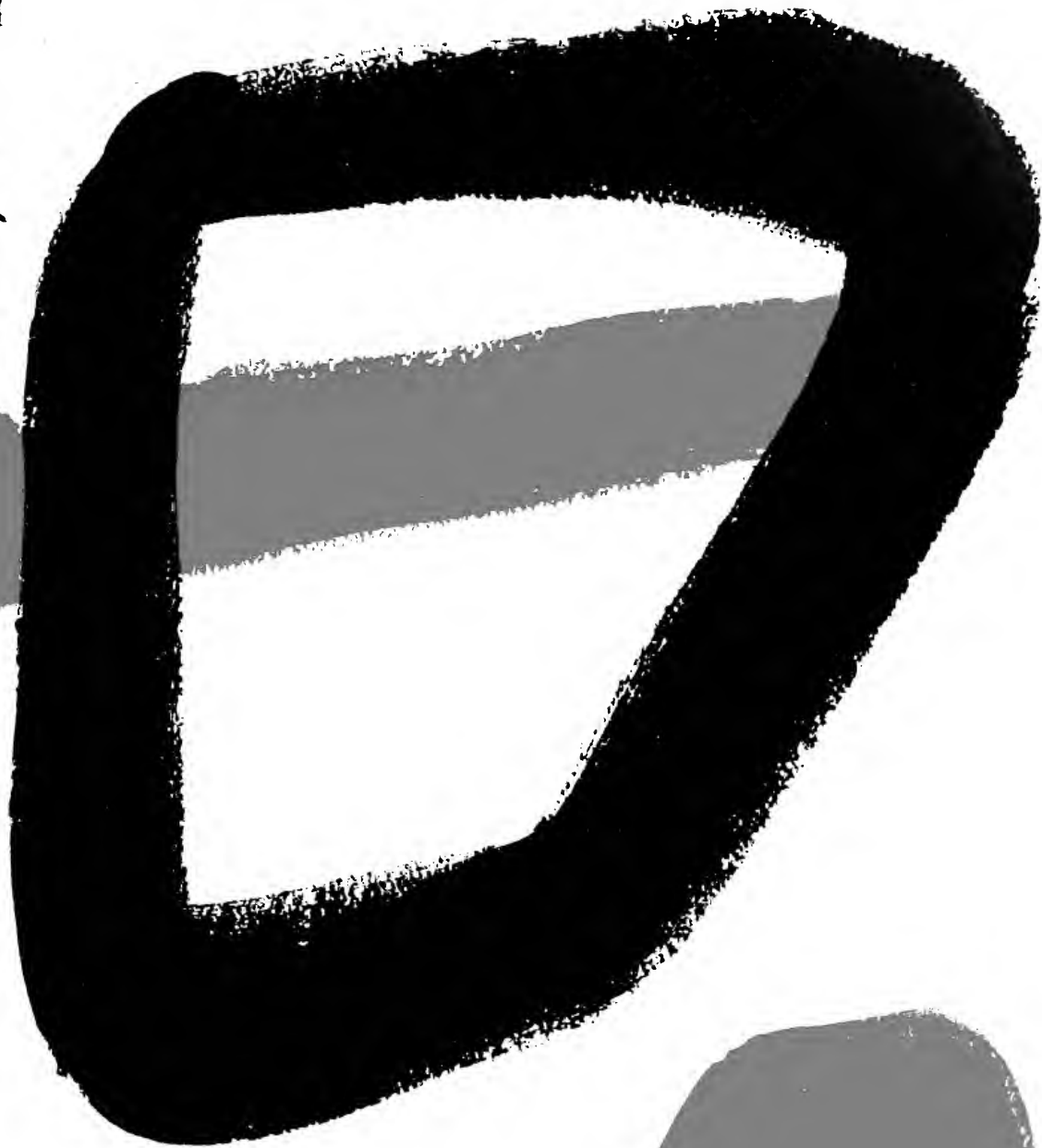


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THE WOMAN'S COLLEGE of the UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

Editor's Notes

CORADDI, student literary magazine of the Woman's College, contains in this issue the material chosen by the student-faculty Committee of Readers for discussion at the Tenth Annual Arts Forum, March 17-21. The undergraduate work presented here will be discussed at the Writing Forum, the morning of March 21, by a panel of critics led by Mr. Saul Bellow. Conferences for individual criticism of students' work are scheduled with the Woman's College resident writers, Mrs. Lettie Rogers and Mr. Robie Macauley.

THE COMMITTEE OF READERS: Sally Beaver, Jarrad Denhard, Janet Fyne, Gwen Hamer, Terrill Schukraft; Professors Jane Summerell, Lettie Rogers, Marc Frielaender, and Robie Macauley, *chairman*.

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ARLENE CROCE:

The Tender Grapes

Alison stood on the tips of her new patent leather shoes and strained for a look in the bathroom mirror. But all she could see, even when she made herself as tall and stretchy as she could, were the two red ribbons her mother was fastening on the top of her head, one at each side, like uncertain butterflies.

"I want to see, Mommy! I want to see," she shouted. Her neck hurt from the strain so she tried jumping up a little. She caught a swift glimpse of her round face and neck and of the collar of her new sailor dress, but it was not enough. She bounded up again and again and each time her eyes were busy photographing the little parts of her that she had missed before. On the way down, she would decide on what she wanted to look at next: the stripes along the edges of her puffed sleeves, or the white row of buttons down her chest or the big red bow that came under her collar and tied in front, and in the second that she was suspended in the air before the glass, she memorized them.

"For heaven's sake, be quiet, will you? You'll wake Louis." Mommy grabbed crossly at her shoulders and spun her around. She looked at Mommy's face and at the pins in her mouth and stood meekly while Mommy lifted her skirt and jerked down the ruffled, starched petticoat underneath, all around and even.

"You're not supposed to put pins in your mouth," she said to Mommy. Her mother did not hear her, but went on busily fastening something underneath and at her waist.

"Mommy, don't put pins in your mouth," she repeated. "You might swallow them, Mommy." She put her hand to touch Mommy's cheek and she thought it felt like velvet.

"This is my favorite dress," she told her mother solemnly. "I like it even better than the brown velvet with the green ribbons because it has got pockets and I look pretty in it."

Mommy extracted the pins and surveyed her and laughed. "Yes you look pretty in it! You're my pretty big girl," she said and hugged her up tight and happy. She thought, Mommy's face is white and soft and it is like a bride and the Fairy Godmother and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

And following her mother out of the bathroom, she recited: "I confess to Almighty God, to Blessed Mary-ever-Virgin, to blessed Michael-the-Archangel, to Blessed John-the-Baptist, to Blessed Mary-ever-Virgin, to Blessed Michael-the-Archangel, to Blessed John-the-Baptist, to Blessed John—the-Mommy, what comes after 'Blessed-John-the-Baptist?'"

"Dear, don't say your prayers now. You know better than that," Mommy said, glancing at her eyes in the long hall mirror. "Save them for catechism this afternoon. Here's my great big boy this morning!"

Louis was standing quietly in a corner of the crib in his fuzzy, faded pajamas with the stocking feet that Alison used to wear when she was a baby. His eyes were solemn and alert and when they came in, his chubby pink fists gripped the railing of the crib and rattled it in immense and mute excitement.

"Here he is!" Mommy swooped him up in her arms and he made breathless panting sounds like a happy baby goat. The room smelled of baby oil and Ivory soapsuds and baby-soiled rubber sheets. The sunshine spread itself through the blinds like thin butter and Alison saw it shine the glass eyes of the teddy bear and light the picture face of the Child Jesus who had a strawberry mouth.

"I can say 'I confess' and 'I believe in God' and 'O my God I am hotly sorry'," she announced to Mommy and the Child Jesus. "Sister Theresa John said I am the best in the class. Daddy said he would buy me a cap pistol if I learned my prayers too. Didn't he Mommy? Will he bring it tonight, Mommy?"

She walked around the room feeling starched and powdered and made of air and her petticoat scratched her where it touched her skin under her armpits. She looked down at her shoes and noticed with dismay two little creases beginning to deepen across each of the shiny black insteps.

"Dear, run get your sweater. It's getting late. The white sweater, the one Aunt Ruth made you." Mommy took Louis into the kitchen and Alison heard her slide him into the high chair, murmuring to him in a tender and fierce whisper, "Yes, you are my darling rascal!"

She marched stiffly and consciously down the hall, keeping her legs ramrod straight like a marionette's, and setting her feet squarely on the floor for fear of spoiling her sleek new shoes.

And Mommy said, pulling her sweater together in front, Don't run, be very careful of Prospect Avenue, say your poem nicely for Miss Chase now, like a big girl and come straight home after school. On the radio was the shoe polish song and in the sink the water was on hard and steam and suds rose from a pile of dishes (Do you have your handkerchief?) and Louis was dripping oatmeal on his chin when she went out, walking like a toy soldier because of the shoes. And mother, watching her to the corner, thought, Perhaps the dress is a little short, but she does have such fine long legs . . .

She arrived in the cloakroom puffing hard because she'd had to run up three flights of stairs (having forgotten the shoes), and when she got to her desk, the class was already standing for the Pledge of Allegiance. Everybody, even Miss Chase, who wore her yellow dress this morning, stood and saluted the flag and during it Alison gazed about the room, because she always did that during the Pledge. Miss Chase had written on the blackboard, Today is Monday, October 3, and also, Mount Hope Elementary School, Grade 2B. Then everybody sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "Good Morning to You," in which, at one point, you were supposed to turn and bow to your neighbor, and although the desk next to Alison's was vacant, she turned and curtsied anyway, drawing back her skirt and tilting her head, imagining the smile.

But there was a new boy this morning and Miss Chase gave him the vacant desk. He came and slid in beside her, the desks being arranged in pairs, but he did not look at her. He looked at his desk, lifted the cover and peered inside, ran his thumb along the ledge, poked his hand into the hole in the upper right hand corner that was for the inkwell. His desk did not have an inkwell. Alison's did. Some of the other desks had them too, but they would not use ink until Grade 2A. The new boy's gaze fastened on Alison's inkwell, shifted to the empty hole in his own desk, then back to the inkwell. Quite suddenly, and with a quick movement that made her jump, he snatched the inkwell out of Alison's desk and put it into his own desk. Alison's hand shot up. Miss Chase, who was in the middle of explaining the meaning of the word, 'Hallowe'en,' hesitated and her eyebrows went up toward Alison.

"He took my inkwell," said Alison loudly.

Miss Chase said, "Leonard, did you take Alison's inkwell? If you took it, please put it back. We won't be using our inkwells this term, anyway."

The new boy replaced the inkwell slowly. He looked straight at Alison and grinned. She saw at once that his teeth were a dingy cream color and greenish up near the gum. She had never met anyone who did not brush his teeth. She had never met anyone with so many freckles, either. They were all over his face and neck and even in his ears and when he turned to look at her, she saw that they went into his nose, too. His hair was long on his neck and matched his freckles. The color of ginger ale, she thought.

Miss Chase said, "Now it's time for everybody to show everybody else the pictures we did Friday. Remember how we made nursery rhyme pictures with our crayons? Well, they are very good pictures indeed, and one by one, when I call on you, you may go and get your picture from your folder and bring it up to my desk. Then, while we all look at your picture, you may tell us your poem. All right?" Then she repeated the instructions in a slow, clear voice. "Now who'd like to begin, stand up."

Everybody jumped up with a great clatter and much slamming of desk tops. Miss Chase opened her mouth into an O and put

her hands over her face and laughed and they laughed too. "Well, we must begin with someone. Suppose we start with Alison."

Alison felt her throat fill with a happy terror and she got her picture out with shaking fingers. After Miss Chase had made her wait until everyone was quiet, she announced, "This is 'Ride a Cock Horse to Banbury Cross,'" and she held her picture for them to see. It was large and beautiful with color and she had used practically all of her crayons on it.

"Now recite the poem," said Miss Chase.

Alison saw the new boy looking at her and, holding her picture against her chest, she recited carefully and directly to him:

"Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross,
And see a fine lady upon a white horse.
Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,
She shall have music wherever she goes."

"Very good indeed, Alison," said Miss Chase. She took Alison's picture and held it higher, turning it slowly so the whole class could see it. "Now look carefully at this, class. See how large and white Alison has made her horse and see how careful she was to fill in blue sky all the way down to the trees and grass. Because, you know, the sky is not just a little blue border at the top, but it is all over. See, in Alison's picture, everywhere you look you can see sky."

"This shows work and imagination. Very nice, Alison, thank you." And Miss Chase stood the picture in the blackboard ledge. Alison sat down trembling and feeling warm and delicious and light as a bubble. Everybody was staring at her and she tried not to let them see how pleased she was. She wanted to remember everything so she could tell Mommy.

The new boy was looking at her too, so she smiled. His eyes were the color of light green agates and he said one word in a short gruff voice.

He said, "Showoff."

They had begun to write long words and in the mornings Miss Chase would pass out great sheets of yellow lined paper and they would write the words, "baby," "little," "mother," three spaces high all over the paper. Alison thought it exciting. She gripped her pencil and labored up and down the hills of the "m" in "mother," trying to make them as smooth and graceful as the hills in Miss Chase's "mother" on the board. The new boy was hard at work on his name card, practicing with his thick pencil the unfamiliar slants and curves that were his name: Leonard O'Neil. Miss Chase had written it for him first on a card and he had traced over and over her writing so many times his card was smeared and grubby.

Alison had already learned to write her name at the top of her paper: alison brown. And also, although she didn't need to add it, grade 2b. And so she said, "I learned that a long time ago."

"You think you're so smart," he growled back. Then, ducking his head on his arms, he watched her out of the corner of his eye and whispered ferociously, "Smarty-pants. Smarty-pants, Smarty-pants."

Alison put her nose in the air. He looked up toward the teacher, then dropped his eyes. In a flash he had pounced on the inkwell.

"Give me that!" Alison made a grab. He held her back with one arm and slipped the inkwell triumphantly into his desk. Alison's hand went up, but Miss Chase had left her desk and was standing in the corridor talking to Miss Tessander, the principal. She made another furious lunge. "Give it to me!" He pushed her back hard and snickered with his tongue between his teeth. She flounced into the aisle.

"Now you're gonna get it. I'll tell Miss Chase and Miss Tessander too. They'll give it to you, too." The class had gone into its customary uproar the instant Miss Chase had stepped out of the room. No one saw him pull her back in her seat. No one but Alison heard him whisper, while he gripped her arm with two strong and dirty little hands, "If you tell on me, I'll get you. I'll get you this afternoon after school."

She pulled her arm free and Miss Chase came back in, but she did not move. "I'll get my gang after you," he added smugly. He flipped the lid of the inkwell a few times while she watched, a queer, painful knot tightening in her stomach. "So you just better not say nothin'. You just better not open your mouth."

She sat there and the corners of her mouth drooped as though she were going to cry, but she didn't cry. I'll get it back, she decided. I'll get it back tomorrow.

She had been listening to "Captain Strange of the Eagle Patrol" and it had ended with Captain Strange and Mickey trapped in the death chamber of Doctor Atom, while the walls and ceiling closed steadily in upon them, rumbling like thunder. She came to the dinner table in a rather agitated state and remained, staring into the mashed potatoes and swinging her heels against the chair legs until Daddy told her to for Pete's sake, sit still and eat your supper.

Alison sighed and drew her invisible cloak around her. Mommy and Daddy went on eating and they looked at her from time to time, but all they could see of her was the shadow of her hand against the tablecloth as her fork stabbed into a piece of lamb chop. I am not here and they cannot see me. Doctor Atom cannot and Captain Strange cannot and Miss Chase cannot see me. And Leonard cannot see me either. I am Invisible.

After supper, she showed Daddy how she could write "mother" and she wrote it in his black calendar book and underneath he wrote "By Alison" and the date. Then he lighted a cigarette and she sat in his lap and looked at the pictures while he read her "Li'l Abner" and "Joe Palooka" and "Terry and the Pirates."

After he had put her to bed and listened to her prayers, she lay with eyes shut tightly and watched the pictures that moved like a silent and still parade across the backs of her eyelids. They were of the old milk wagon dripping ice that she had seen that morning on Prospect Avenue and of the front of her classroom with the orange jack o'lanterns in a row over the blackboard and of Miss Chase in her yellow dress. She remembered the new word she had learned from the third grade reader that Miss Chase had given her. *Tantalizing*. Tan-ta-li-zing . . . She saw the four goldfish they kept with some marbles in a tank on the window sill and she watched them flick about in the bubbling water, mouths opening as though they had head colds and were trying to suck in air through their mouths. And she saw Leonard and with a little deadening start in her stomach, she thought about the inkwell and about having to wake up tomorrow and go to school and sit beside him and in the back of her mind, the shoeshine song started up:

"It's time to shine—It's Time to Shine . . ."

Tantalizing. It is a . . . Tanta-lizing tune.

The pictures faded. She was asleep.

The inkwell remained in Leonard's desk all morning and so did Leonard. I will get it as soon as he moves, she thought. As soon as he is gone I will get it and I will not be afraid. She was not afraid now. She had noticed long ago that she was taller than Leonard (she was taller than all of the girls and most of the boys) and a great deal smarter and besides, Miss Chase liked her, she knew that. She realized that Leonard must not know what she was thinking and she stopped answering him back every time when he'd call her "Stuck-up" or "Smart-alec." So he began, in his wavering and cramped beginning handwriting to write her notes:

der alcne

you er stupd grl and i wel get you
wat do you thing of it youstenk.

leonard

She crumpled it into a ball without even looking at him and he did not send her any more.

A little while after recess, Miss Chase called Leonard up to her desk to hear him read. Alison watched him go and her heart began to pound. Now, she thought. Everybody was busy drawing black witches and smiling moons and haunted houses with violently smoking chimneys and there was no noise in the room

but the small busy undercurrent of sound that children make when they are absorbed in the business of defining a world in wax crayon on construction paper.

Leonard sat with Miss Chase at her desk, in deep and miserable concentration over the story of Chicken Little. Alison pretended to be working until Miss Chase's eyes stopped travelling over the class and dropped to her book. It was very easy. She was amazed at how easy it was. Her hand went out, captured the inkwell and brought it back. There, she'd done it. The tension eased out of her and she took a casual and elated look around. No one had seen her. I have beat him. I have *beat* him.

She could hear him now, his voice rising in a high hesitant monotone over the hum of the class. She took her reader out of her desk and placed it over the inkwell. Perhaps he would think some one else had taken it. She tried to work on her drawing but she could not, and ended by peeling the paper from all of her crayons. Her desk became littered with bits of spiraled paper and she scooped them up and carried them to the wastebasket. Her knees had become shaky and she wanted terribly to wash the crayon marks off her hands. She raised her hand, asking to be excused and went downstairs to the girls' bathroom. When she came back, Leonard was in his seat and the book was still over the inkwell.

She could feel the weight of his green eyes stinging the side of her face as she sat down, and her hands went damp and lifeless in her lap. She kept her gaze rigid upon the protective figure of Miss Chase who was putting spelling words on the blackboard.

"You better give it back," he said. "You got my inkwell and you better give it back to me."

"I haven't got it," she answered, keeping her eyes away. "And besides it's not your inkwell, it's mine."

"You have too got it. It's right under that book. You better let me have it if you don't want to get hurt, boy."

Miss Chase glanced toward them with an expression of surprise and annoyance. When she had turned away again, he added slowly, "I'm warnin' you. I'll get my gang after you."

She looked at him. He sat hunched forward the way he always did, his arms crossed over the desk and his chin perched just high enough over his thin wrists for her to see him grinning.

"You don't believe me, do you. Well you better run home today 'cause we're comin' after you."

Alison looked at his face. She wanted to hurt him, hurt him so he'd stop grinning. "Why don't you ever brush your teeth," she said. "You pig."

"Leonard! Alison!" Miss Chase turned from the blackboard, shutting her book with a snap. "Now I want that talking stopped immediately. Alison, I'm surprised at you. Leonard, if I catch you causing a disturbance once more, you'll remain after school this afternoon."

She turned back to the board and Alison made a satisfied and superior little mouth in Leonard's direction. With one hard fist he punched down on her shoulder with all his boy-strength. The blow shook her; her first impulse was to swing viciously back, but Miss Chase was coming away from the board now and Alison held herself back, feeling strangely guilty. Leonard snickered softly "Hee, hee, hee," under his breath.

At 3:05, in the girls' cloak room, she looked through the iron grating and saw him on the other side nudge a boy and say, pointing to her, "That's the one."

At 3:08, lined up by two's, the girls passed the boys on the way out and he whispered to her as she went by, "Get a good head start, we're comin' after you."

Out in the street, Alison ran. She did not even look back. She ran across the street, kicking up the gutter leaves, ran away from the school, from the crowds of noisy children, from the policeman on the corner. At the bottom of a hill, she stopped, breathing hard, her heart pounding against her throat and ears. At the top of the hill a group of boys appeared running and yelling. She turned and cut across a driveway. She ran through two backyards, ducking clotheslines and trampling flower beds. At Prospect Avenue the light was red but she ran across anyway,

forcing deep, sharp pains into her chest, and not stopping until her hands touched the knob of the back door of her house and she could lean puffing against the wall, exhausted, flushed, and perspiring, yet full of a radiant excitement.

Her mother could not understand why her daughter had run all the way home like that, or what she meant when she breathed triumphantly, "I made it. Mommy, I *made* it."

That was Tuesday. Wednesday morning Alison found a note on her desk.

you got away but i wel get you
tonit. you wel be ded tonit.
the avenger

The inkwell had not been moved. Leonard did not try to move it again, but occupied himself all day long by writing notes like the first one and chuckling over her annoyance. Once while she was learning her spelling, he reached over and gave the nape of her neck a hard pinch.

During recess when she was standing near the fence waiting for her friend Sandra's class to come out, he came up to her, chewing gum vigorously and blew a big insolent bubble in her face. He stood there chewing and said:

"I really am comin' after you tonight. I'm comin' after you go to sleep and burn the house down. And kill everybody in it. Maybe you better not go to sleep tonight."

Alison ran home again that afternoon and flung herself, all out of breath into her mother's lap. "I wish you wouldn't run so hard, dear," her mother said, embracing her and then drawing back for a look at her face. There were two worry lines standing out on Mommy's forehead. Her father noticed that Alison was unusually quiet that evening and, thinking she must be tired, he put her, ignoring her protests, to bed where she lay awake for five minutes before it occurred to her, as something of a shock, that Leonard did not know where she lived. She smiled deeply to herself, sighed and stretched. He doesn't even know where we live.

All the rest of the week she struggled to ignore Leonard. She tore up innumerable notes that always said the same thing, that he would come tonight to burn the house down. He had never chased her home, but he always threatened to and she ran every afternoon. He began tormenting her by pushing her elbow while she was writing and spilling the contents of her pencil box as often as he could. He had developed the trick of leaning very close to her ear and whispering, "Aren't you scared of me?" Whenever he could manage it without being seen, he tickled her, or pinched her, or grabbed at her legs as she stood up or sat down. Once he had gotten his hand on her leg high above the knee and she had given him a mighty push backward, trembling and suddenly very frightened.

Her discomfort delighted him. "You're scared, aren't you?" He grinned and pushed her arm. "You're scared to death."

Saturday morning Alison took Louis out to play in the yard. They walked around by the picket fence, Louis rattling a stick along the boards as they went by.

"I know what let's do," Alison said to him. "Let's make powder." She found some pebbles in the driveway and piled them up and then got two large stones. They squatted on the cement of the driveway and Alison showed Louis how to pound the pebbles into smooth, white and sparkling powder with the big stones. "See? Isn't this fun?" said Alison gaily, the cement thundering under her blows.

Louis' mouth dropped in a pout and he flung away his stone. "No!" he said emphatically. He picked up his stick and ran it back and forth along the fence again.

"All right then, let's play teatime." Alison got her plastic tea set from the back porch and spread cups and saucers neatly in a row on the fence shelf. With one expert swipe of his stick, Louis removed them and they went clattering to the ground.

"Oh Louis!" Alison stamped her foot. "You bad boy!" She snatched the stick from his hand and gave him a light shake.

Louis' face screwed up and his mouth opened wide. Hastily she replaced the stick in his fist.

"Now Louis, wouldn't you like to have some milk in my little cups? See?" She held up a tiny cup and pretended to drink from it. "Mommy could give us some milk and we could have a party. That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

Louis' solemn pink face brightened and Alison ran to fill her teapot with milk, thinking that Louis had a strawberry mouth, like the Child Jesus.

"Now," she said when she came back, "I'll be the Mommy and you be the Daddy and this is our house and we'll have tea."

She poured milk into a cup for Louis and before she could pour her own, he had drunk it off. "No, Louis, you don't drink it 'til I'm ready." And she refilled his cup. "Now wait for me." But the milk was already gone. Alison put down the teapot.

"Well if you're not going to play right, I'm going inside." She stamped off. Louis emitted a bellow of protest. She did not stop. He screamed briefly and then again, as loudly as he could. When she kept on walking, he rushed to the fence and began hurling down the dishes.

"Stop that, Louis!" Alison shouted. She ran up to him and hit him in the chest. Louis caught his breath in surprise. "You rat!" Alison yelled. "You dirty rat!"

Louis opened his mouth and wailed lustily. Before Alison knew it, her mother was hurrying across the yard toward them, her hands dripping soapsuds and her mouth in a straight furious line. Without a word she snatched Alison around and slapped her once across the mouth.

"Don't you ever use that word again." Her voice was low so the neighbors could not hear, and trembling with anger. "And the next time you hit Louis you'll get worse than that." Mommy gave Alison a shove toward the house. "Now you go straight to your room, young lady, and don't let me hear a word from you. Wait 'til your father comes home, just wait!"

Alison sat in her room hiccupping, the tears still stinging her eyes, the taste of soapsuds in her mouth. She had never tasted soap before. Her throat was raw and her eyelids felt thick and heavy. The house had settled into quiet. It was time for lunch but she was not hungry, because she had begun to feel shaky and ill, as though she were going to throw up. It was also time for Daddy to come home and she knew nothing would happen to her when he did. She also knew that she could go downstairs now, if she wanted to, and apologize to Mommy, and that she would be kissed and forgiven and everything would be all right. But she didn't move.

Outside it was raining. Lightly at first and then a chilling downpour and she watched it spatter the shingled roof of the house next door. Below, her father's car came up the drive, its tires grinding on the stones they had left in the way. And in a little while she heard the talking.

"Oh I don't know what I'm going to do with these damn kids," her mother was saying. Especially that Alison. I don't know what's the matter with her lately. Today she hit the baby and she said 'you rat'. And you know how I hate that word."

"What did you do?" Her father's voice was preoccupied and Alison knew he was leaning against the kitchen sink looking at the paper.

"Well I let her have a good one on the mouth. I had soap on my hands and I think she got a good taste of it too."

"What did you hit her in the mouth for?"

There was a long pause and Alison heard the sound of a newspaper being tossed on the metallic top of the kitchen table.

"Don't you know you're never supposed to hit a kid in the mouth?"

"I think I know what I'm doing—"

"If you have to hit the kid, smack her behind. Don't ever hit a kid anywhere on the face." Her father's footsteps started across the linoleum.

"It's a bad thing. She upstairs?"

She heard her father coming up the carpeted stairs. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. In a moment she heard him

come in the door and pause. "Alison?" She did not stir. He crossed the room and closed the window against the rain, went out and shut the door quietly behind him.

Alison wanted taps on her shoes. Mommy thought it was ridiculous and heaven knows, she made enough noise playing those silly war games. Leonard had taps on his shoes. He came in one morning and, bending one leg up behind, he showed Alison the two shiny metal plates on the soles of his shoes and clicked importantly around in a circle to show how much noise they made. Alison thought them very glamorous and began to fret because Mommy would not let her have them too.

She was beginning, so the mother thought, to become strangely unmanageable. She was stubborn, rebellious, and inclined to display a new and nasty temper, especially toward Louis, followed by long sulking spells. Her mother also noticed, with no little degree of alarm, that she was developing the disagreeable habit of biting her nails. And she watched her daughter over her reading glasses and decided, with a little purse of her lips, that she must take her for a thorough examination one day soon.

Leonard passed the book from hand to hand and all the boys in the rows behind put their hands over their mouths and giggled in a certain funny way that made Alison curious. When Leonard pushed the book toward her with that sly grin, she knew it was going to be something she should not look at, but she did look at it and felt the heat rise instantly in her cheeks.

It was their second grade reader with the familiar pictures of Dick and Dot and their dog, Jippo. But Leonard had, with a loud pencil, altered one little part of each of them, even Jippo, that showed them doing something Alison knew you should only do behind a certain closed door. And he had done this throughout the book. She was aware of an intense revulsion, and of what was worse, of a deep squirming humiliation because all of the boys were laughing at her. She flushed and hated it so much, the tears welled in her eyes. She prayed Miss Chase would catch them passing the book around but she never did.

A little later on, Leonard whispered to her, "Do you know what next week is? It's Hallowe'en. That's the night I'm gonna come after you. Remember? Well I got a white horse and I'm gonna wait until nine o'clock on Hallowe'en and then I'm gonna ride right up on the porch and burn down your house."

Alison, giving herself the extreme pleasure of narrowing her eyes and thrusting out her chin, snapped, "You don't even know where I live, smarty."

"Oh, yes I do," said Leonard. "Yes, I know. You live right off Prospect Avenue in a white house with red screens and a mail box in front."

She was stunned. She could not believe he knew her house.

"And know what I'm gonna do? After I burn down the house, well, I'm gonna kill your mother and father and throw them down the toilet and then I'm gonna get you. And I'm gonna chop you up in little pieces with my hat-chet. But I don't think I'll kill your little brother. He's too small. He can stay alive. He—"

"No! No you're not!" She clutched his arm and sank her strong enraged fingers in with all her might. "You're not!"

"Yes I am. Yes I am," Leonard shouted happily. "You better look out 'cause—"

At that moment Miss Chase appeared in the doorway wearing her familiar expression of horrified disapproval. The class became instantly silent.

She was terrified as she had never been before. She did not think for a moment to disbelieve him. To her it was as true and imminent and unpreventable as tomorrow morning. But how did he know her house? How did he know?

"Oh," he said, grinning at her out of the corner of his eye and flipping the pages of his speller, "Oh, I got my gang to find out for me."

The pictures that began to move in her head that night were crowded and obscured. She thought she saw a beetle and she thought she saw the goldfish again behind an iron grating and

Leonard on a white horse . . . "Ride a white horse to Banbury Cross and see a fine lady upon a . . . upon a goldfish."

Later on she woke up in the night and had to go to the bathroom. First she thought of calling to Mommy or Daddy but they might think her a baby, so she went slowly and a little fearfully through the blackness by herself. In the bathroom the light was not nearly so bright as she thought it would be. In fact, against the yellow tile it looked as though it were two o'clock in the afternoon. When she heard the scratching, very faint, she thought it was the cricket noise but it came again and this time with a low growl and she had to fling herself against the door and hold it shut against the noise because it was a wolf with red eyes. But the wolf was very strong and her feet kept slipping on the bathroom rug and her hands kept slipping across the tile and the door pushed, pushed open and the wolf roared into her eyes—

Mommy was there. The lamp was on and Mommy's cool fingers pressed against Alison's forehead and, leaning, she kissed her and murmured against her ear, warming her with her body. And when she had fallen back into sleep, Mommy sat and stared bleakly at the lamp, smoking, and feeling a steady and uneasy concern start within her mind.

She was undressed to her waist and sitting on a narrow leather bed with clean sheets on it and the doctor stood so close to her she could feel him breathe and see that his eyes were red-rimmed and tired. There were great cold lights all around and a nurse stood behind her and her mother sat in a corner holding her hat and coat.

The doctor had thin red hair and short sleeves on his shirt and, humming to himself, he prodded her with strong white fingers and cool metal. He looked with a flashlight into her ears and throat and nose. Then he said suddenly, pressing his fingers along under her jaw, "Ever read the funnies, Alison?"

She thought it an extremely strange question but she answered politely, "My Daddy reads them to me."

"Oh he does, does he," he said with a glance at her mother. "How about those—comic books. Ever read them?"

Alison loved comic books. She had thirty-four in her collection and only last week she had traded Warren, who lived down the street, one *Batman* for two *Human Torches* and thought it quite an accomplishment. But before she could answer, her mother said from the corner, "My God, Howard, that's all she reads. The house is full of them. And I know how harmful they are, but she loves them."

The doctor stood back a moment, watching Alison and chewing the inside of his cheek.

"And the radio. She loves those noisy kid programs that come on about five o'clock. Howard, I don't think it's good. I've argued with Sid about them and he seems to think they don't do any harm. But I have noticed she's becoming extremely nervous and I'm afraid they are to blame."

Alison wished her mother had not said that. She wished her mother would not say anything more. She wanted to put her clothes on and go home.

"How about school, Alison," the doctor said. "Do you like school?"

"Yes I do," she said, in almost a whisper.

"She does very well," her mother said. "We're really quite proud of her. They've given her a third grade reader and we expect her to skip the rest of the second year."

"Hmmm," said the doctor. "Well, well." And he winked at Alison. She decided she liked him but she wanted terribly to go home.

The doctor and her mother went into his office and closed the door. The nurse helped her dress but she was a very young nurse with pimples and she buttoned Alison's blouse wrong and had to button it all over again. She sat afterwards in a chair made of steel and strips of cloth and looked at "Life" magazine while her mother talked to the doctor.

They drove home in a little while and her mother said nothing all the way.

Alison was afraid. It was morning and she could smell the bacon and her mother had called to her twice to get up but she did not want to get up. She did not want to go to school. But if she stayed home she would have to stay in bed or put on her corduroy pants and sit in the sun in the yard. She wanted to go to the park and watch the bears with their shaggy brown bodies and velvet eyes and the flamingoes and the swans that were so beautiful but had frightened her with their sharp bills once when they came too near.

She was frightened now. She knew she would get up and Mommy would wash her face and neck and she would put on something starched and fragrant and eat Cream of Wheat and go to school. And there would be the shoe polish song on the radio that made something inside of her fall heavily and sharply whenever she heard it or sang it to herself: "*It's time to shine.*" It's time to get up, Alison. You'll be late if you don't. No. No I don't want to. I don't want to go any more.

But she did. How she wished it were Saturday.

Every afternoon this week the class had worked in plasticene. Everybody had a great green chunk of it on his desk and Alison liked the way it smelled. You played with it, rolling it thin like dough and making it into cigars and giraffes and elephants. Alison wanted to make a buddha. Daddy had taken her to the museum one rainy afternoon and all by itself in one dim, hushed room, was a buddha, calm and old and enormous. Its smile was carved in cracked green wood and its eyes were emeralds. Plasticene was right in color and odor, she decided, to make a buddha.

Her clay was too hard at first so she worked it between slow fingers until it was soft and warm and pliable. Leonard whistled to himself between his teeth as he worked, building what looked like a thick, staggering beehive out of limp green coils of plasticene. She watched him rolling out long ropes of clay under two flat busy palms, back and forth across the desk, his elbows pumping like pistons, then take the roll and spiral it upwards in the shape of a python. He had dozens of clay cylinders lined up on his desk, obviously and hugely proud of them. Alison thought they were curious and ugly and she wanted to tell him so, but she didn't dare.

My buddha will be lovely, she thought, shaping the lump of warm clay. She remembered the dim polished room and her mind became full of a cool green light and faraway she heard the hushed footfalls of little Chinese children and the stunning sound of a gong.

"What's that?" Leonard was watching the squatted buddha figure form under her fingers. His expression was one of revolted incredulity.

"It is a buddha," she said with dignity. She knew he did not know what a buddha was and she was not going to tell him.

"A—butter!" He waited for her to turn on him. "A butter! How can you make green butter. Hey!" He turned and poked the boy across the aisle. "She's making green butter!" And the two of them doubled into a fit of giggling.

"It isn't butter," Alison said loudly. "It is a Chinese buddha."

Leonard was puzzled. He propped his head on his elbow and watched her curiously. "I bet you don't even know any Chinese."

"I do too," Alison stated. She knew Oscar, whose father owned a laundry near her grandmother's house. She knew the puckish grin on his round yellow face when he would give her toffee wrapped in little twists of paper with Chinese writing. He gave her small lacy parasols made from stiff, painted paper and thin sticks. He gave her spreading, delicately-flowered fans and once, a small accordion-pleated dragon. She liked him better, she thought, than any boy she knew, except Louis. She would give her buddha to Oscar when she was through.

"Well, that sure stinks," Leonard said. "That is the louiest thing I ever saw."

When she did not answer him or even glare at him, he leaned close and his breath smelled of licorice. Instantly she drew her buddha to the far corner of her desk. She was intent on making its slitted eyes with the sharp point of a pencil, but somehow she had lost the green light in her mind. He came closer and

whispered hot and thick into her ear, "I'm gonna get you tonight." He put his arm around her and dug his fingers into her armpit and began tickling her. She squirmed desperately to get free. He pushed her elbow suddenly and the buddha fell over on its back. Alison shoved against him with all her strength, clawing at his chest. He grinned into her face with his small licorice teeth and sang, "I'm coming to-ni-ight, I'm coming to-ni-ight."

"Oh shut up," she snapped at him. "I hate you. I hate you and those dirty old green snakes all over your desk and your dirty teeth and you stink! You stink like a rat!"

Leonard's fist came around her and she saw his eyes glitter before she saw what he had done. Her buddha lay flattened into one green pulp on her desk.

She had the pencil still in her hand and she stood up above Leonard and punched the point of it straight down into the top of his skull.

Leonard opened his mouth in shock but no sound came out. He got to his feet, his hands pressed to his head, staring at her, and his freckled face screwed up as though he were screaming inside. Miss Chase was at the far end of the noisy room tacking drawings onto a wall. He stumbled toward her, crying noiselessly and his shoes clacked on the polished floor.

Some boys had seen her do it and were staring at her as she sat down and quietly began re-molding the plasticene. She felt controlled and not at all frightened, now. She was certain Leonard was not hurt, but she was glad if he was. And a boy said to her slowly and with round eyes, "Boy, are *you* gonna be in trouble."

They sat in Miss Tessander's dim office that smelled of Kindergarten paste and the clock ticked loudly on the wall once every minute. Everybody had gone home and Leonard had been sent home too, with a note from Miss Tessander who had washed his face and soothed the hurt on his head with Mercurochrome and two crossed Band-Aids. Miss Tessander sat now in the swivel chair at her desk and regarded Alison gravely. Miss Chase stood nearby, her hair disarranged, looking quite unhappy in the face. They were waiting for her mother.

"Come here, dear," Miss Tessander drew Alison with a hard hand against the arm of her chair. "Now why don't you tell us why you hurt Leonard?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

"Well now, you must have had some reason. You know that was a very nasty thing to do, don't you? You might have hurt Leonard very, very badly."

Alison kept her eyes on the rug and did not answer.

"Did you see where you hurt Leonard?" Miss Tessander's voice had a bit of an edge. "Did you?"

Alison shook her head.

"Why she did too," Miss Chase said. "Alison, didn't I show you the hole you made in Leonard's head with your pencil? Yes, of course you saw it." She turned to Miss Tessander. "I cannot imagine what got into her. She's such a quiet child."

Alison looked at Miss Chase's pale face and thought, with surprise, she is against me.

Miss Tessander said, "Are you happy you hurt Leonard?"

She looked at Miss Tessander's watery blue eyes and starched white face and at the thin eyeglasses she wore perched on her nose. She tried to say, "No, Miss Tessander," but it wouldn't come out, so she shook her head.

They heard quick heels on the varnished floor of the corridor and her mother came in. Alison could see that her face was tense behind her veil and she talked in a nervous, impatient voice.

Miss Tessander was saying with a half-way apologetic smile, "Well, Mrs. Brown, we know she had some reason, but the child doesn't seem to want to tell us. Perhaps you—"

"I'm sure she didn't mean to do it," her mother said. "She must have been provoked into it by that other child. Alison is not a vicious child and she's not to blame, I'm certain of that."

Miss Tessander said, "Of course, Mrs. Brown. Alison is a bright and well-behaved child, we know, but nevertheless, she did hurt the little boy today. That's all we know, and since we are

responsible for the welfare of each child in this school—" (with a glance at Miss Chase, who flushed deeply)—"we must have some explanation to give to the family of this boy."

Her mother pondered silently a moment and opened her bag. "May I smoke?"

"Of course."

She lit a cigarette, blew smoke in the air and stretched out her hand. "Come here, Alison. Tell me what that boy did to you. Did he say anything to you?"

"Darling, you don't want people to think you're a naughty girl, do you?" Her mother's voice was soft and close and Alison knew she was going to cry. She stared at the jeweled pin at her mother's throat and as her mother talked, it became blurred. "Of course not. Then tell Miss Tessander and Miss Chase and me why you did it. Did he hit you?"

She shook her head.

"Did he take something from you? Tell us, dear. We won't hurt you."

She burst into tears. Mommy had to give her a handkerchief and she turned away, hot and mortified, wiping her eyes.

Her mother said, flicking an ash from her cigarette, "I really don't see how this happened with a capable person in charge."

Miss Tessander cleared her throat. "I'm afraid it is impossible for one teacher to control every child in the class at all times, Mrs. Brown. Miss Chase does her best but she can't be expected to watch everyone."

Miss Chase said, hesitatingly, "Well, I have noticed a slight friction between Alison and Leonard, the little boy, and have found it necessary to reprimand them several times." She stopped and they seemed to be waiting for her to go on. "At the time the incident occurred, the children were busy modeling in plasticene and were naturally noisier than usual and, you know, it was kind of hard for me to—"

"What kind of a child is this—Leonard?" her mother asked suddenly.

Miss Chase glanced at Miss Tessander and began uneasily. "Leonard is a—rather strange child. He came to us late, you know. His father died this past summer and he lives with his mother and, I believe there are five other children, all boys. He is not a very bright child and I have trouble sometimes keeping him occupied. I thought that perhaps Alison, being so advanced, could help him with his spelling, or—"

Miss Tessander said, "Mrs. Brown, we do think highly of Alison. She's a conscientious worker and we have always thought her unusually bright. That is why it is so difficult for us to understand what could have been in her mind to do such a thing. Perhaps there is . . . something in Alison's history we don't know? If she has ever been ill, or—"

"Alison is a perfectly normal child," her mother said in a voice so sharp Alison looked up at her face and Miss Tessander frowned faintly. "She has never been ill" in her life.

"She is a very sensitive child. Obviously, this Leonard child is not at all well-bred and I fail to see why his seat was not changed when the 'friction', as you say, occurred."

Miss Chase said quickly, "I will change his seat tomorrow, Mrs. Brown. I was never given any indication that it should have been changed before."

"I fail to understand that," said her mother.

Miss Chase said, with a tightness about her mouth, "Mrs. Brown, perhaps I should tell you that lately Alison has not been as well-behaved as she used to be. I have had to reprimand her quite often lately."

"I fail to understand that. Alison loves her schoolwork. I have never had a bit of trouble with her." Her mother's voice rose sharply. Alison wriggled uncomfortably and wanted to leave.

"I can see she is not getting the proper attention here at school."

Miss Tessander said, "Mrs. Brown, we have been giving Alison more than adequate attention. She has proved herself capable of taking on advanced work and we fully intend that she be allowed

to enter the third grade in January. If you like, we will change her to Miss Reynolds' class until then—"

"I am afraid that would not be enough. My husband and I have been thinking of transferring Alison to the Saint Germaine Academy." She stood up, twisting out her cigarette, and took Alison's hand. "I think it will be good for her and I think that is what we will do."

The two teachers stood helplessly. "If that is what you think best—" Miss Tessander's voice was icy,—"then we hope Alison will be happy there."

"Goodbye Miss Tessander. Miss Chase." Her mother tugged at her hand and as they went out, Alison looked back and saw Miss

Chase sit down slowly and put her face in her hands.

In the new school all the girls wore blue uniforms with long sleeves and white collars and long white stockings that you had to wear a garter belt for. Alison loved her uniform and she loved her little locker with the secret combination that only she knew and no one else in the world.

She loved the wise sisters in the silent black habits that she curtsied to in the corridor. She loved the ivory statue of the crucified Jesus in the foyer and the little bells that rang at noon for the Angelus.

There were no boys in the new school. She did not miss the boys.

ROBERT C. AGEE:

Manners

The Admiral paused at the head of the stairs to catch his breath and look back on the distance he had climbed. He readjusted his tie, brushed some imaginary dust from his jacket, and stood breathing deeply for a long time. Then he continued on to the next flight of stairs and leaned against the bannister and stared down at his neat suede shoes, which he tried to polish on the back of his pants legs. He looked up the stairs and scratched his gray hair.

The Admiral did not want to yell. He was too tired. There were circles beneath his eyes and his plump red cheeks trembled with exhaustion and he could feel his legs weaken. He blinked and put one foot on the first step and surveyed the long slope ahead.

"Harriet! . . . Harriet!" He finally shouted.

The Admiral waited until he had his breath and then began up the stairs. Harriet came out of the room at the head of the stairs and wiped her hands on her red frilled apron and looked quizzically at the master.

"Yes, Mr. Appleton." She said flatly.

"Have you finished up there?" The Admiral asked, and coughed twice. He advanced another step.

Harriet looked back through the open door. She turned and stared at the Admiral, her eyes very narrow and tired. For a moment she rubbed her hands on the apron, then said: "Why no, Mr. Appleton . . . but I just got a bit to do . . ."

The Admiral had almost reached the top. He leaned on the wall and raised one foot and reached the next to last step. Harriet moved towards the door, pushing back her curly brown hair and toying with her cheap necklace.

"Good God." He bellowed . . . "You certainly take long enough." He cleared his throat and reached the top and pulled back his shoulders, inhaling at the same time to decrease his waist-line. "Why, what seems to be the trouble here?" He walked to the door, making sure his posture was correct and his eyes properly cool and efficient.

"Well, Mr. Appleton . . ." Harriet began, dutifully taking a broom from the corner, "this isn't an easy job. I got to be careful how I clean with all these ships around."

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"I'm doing my best."

"Of course, of course. I thought you might come and make my tea, and a sandwich, of course. I'm going out this afternoon."

"Why, Mr. Appleton, you didn't have to come all the way up here. Why didn't you call?"

"I suppose you're right, Harriet," the Admiral said, and pulled his gray jacket up around his shoulders. He played with the buttons and smoothed the tiny creases on the front.

The Admiral looked at the wall above the door, scrutinized each corner, studied the floor, ran an immaculate finger over an especially dusty spot, shook his head and compressed his lips and walked into his private room to continue the inspection. Harriet stood aside and watched. She leaned on the broom and took little panting breaths. The Admiral walked to the window,

got one perspective on the room, then changed position and cocked his head.

The room was incredibly neat, and filled with sunlight that came through the large bay window on the far side. Below the window was a bare window seat, flanked by single shelves on the wall. Each shelf had a ship on it. One was a scale model of a battleship, and the other an ordinary toy schooner, which was the Admiral's favorite. The floor was covered with brilliant blue paper, except for the end near the door where the Admiral could stand and watch the ocean, represented, with some degree of imagination, by the paper. And there were all kinds of ships on the ocean; dozens of models separated by size and age. Down at the opposite end of the room an island rose against the wall. The beach was made of real sand, and the country of real dirt and some clumps of grass and a few arbitrarily placed twigs. A back-drop was painted on the wall, and the Admiral had even thought to hang miniature airplanes from the ceiling—and if he narrowed his eyes, as he was now doing, he could not see the threads. The Admiral was greatly pleased. Harriet had dusted everywhere and there were no traces of the mess he had made the night before when the ships of the Seventh Fleet had demolished enemy gun installations over by a wilted oak twig.

He continued to examine the room, standing with his hands on hips and one foot lifted awkwardly to the window seat.

"Well done, Harriet, well done," he said, and looked at the ceiling.

"Thank you, Mr. Appleton. But just you wait. I didn't get to that far corner yet . . . but it'll really be nice when I finish up."

"Of course, Harriet . . . but you had better come and prepare my lunch," he said, and smiled gently. He coughed and looked at the battle of Jutland on the right hand side of the room.

"All right, Mr. Appleton." Harriet bent down to pick up a scrap of paper. She stood up and looked at the Admiral, pursing her lips and moving the broom lightly over the floor.

Meanwhile, the Admiral combed his hair with the side of his hand. He thought for a moment, bringing a finger to his lip and delicately chewing the nail. He snapped his wrist and looked at his watch, gazed at Okinawa, pulled his sleeve over the watch, and strode out of the room. He turned and waited for Harriet, who hurried around the room, pretending to neaten a few spots. She walked out to the hall with her equipment, several dust rags and the broom and a bucket of filthy water.

"Harriet . . ." The Admiral stood pensively at the head of the stair before starting down. "Where are my opera glasses?"

"In your bed room, sir," Harriet said, and hurried past the Admiral down the stairs. "I'll fix your lunch."

"Fine, very fine," he said, and watched her go. Then he went back to the room and over to the shelf and carefully took down the schooner. He tightened the sails and the rigging, polished it with his sleeve, cleaned the sleeve on the other side of his coat, and tip-toed to the door. He looked out cautiously, then hurried down the stairs and into his room. He put the schooner in a box, and paused before the mirror to make sure his clothes were in order.

Harriet had a couple of sandwiches and a cup of tea waiting for him. He sat down at the kitchen table, but did not feel like eating. He looked out the window and draped one hand idly over the box with the schooner in it.

"Aren't you hungry, Mr. Appleton?" Harriet asked, removing her apron and pouring a cup of tea.

"Why, of course, of course . . . I don't know what I'd do without you, Harriet."

"Oh, Mr. Appleton . . . please . . ." She looked over the rim of her cup and then busied herself with the tea.

The Admiral bolted his sandwich in silence and went outside after choosing his favorite walking stick from the collection he kept in the closet. Harriet stood on the door step.

"You'll be home for dinner, won't you, Mr. Appleton?"

The Admiral looked at her warmly. "Why, yes, I'll see you tonight." And he left.

For some time he admired the clear blue skies and the green trees and sniffed the aroma of spring and felt the uncertain wind against his face. He smiled and drew in long draughts of air and tapped his walking stick first on the side walk, then on soft earth, and finally on a blue-stone path.

The Admiral rang Miss Bradshaw's door bell, and looked back at the path and the rows of flowers framing it. The lawn was freshly trimmed and there were little heaps of grass by the gate. The Admiral stared up into the oak trees and the mesh of leaves moving against the sky. He rang the bell again, snapped the stick to his shoulder and rocked on his heels. He whistled incoherently.

Inside, Miss Bradshaw swirled by the mirror, removed some gray hair from her forehead, and then checked every inch of her dress, which was cotton with red trim. She glanced at the table and the carefully arranged silver and the tea cups, and hurried to the door, opening it as slowly as she could. She smiled. "Why hello, Mr. Appleton. I'm glad you could come. Step right in . . ." she said.

"You look very charming, Miss Bradshaw, very charming indeed," the Admiral said, and walked past her. He stopped by a low table and put down the box and rested his stick against the wall.

Miss Bradshaw waited with a delicately outstretched hand. The Admiral turned around and shook it, and rubbing his hands, watched her lead the way to the table where the tea was.

"My, but it's a lovely day," she said.

The Admiral agreed as he followed her. They sat down and Miss Bradshaw folded her hands in her lap, and then began pouring the tea. The Admiral watched her work gracefully and efficiently. She trembled when she had to hold the pitcher for any length of time, and he turned his head discreetly, and then put cream and sugar in the tea.

"Tell me how you've been," she said.

"I've been fine . . . no complaints whatsoever."

"That's grand, Admiral . . . before we go any farther, should I call you Admiral or Mr. Appleton? I've had such a hard time deciding, and none of my friends seem to know."

The Admiral smiled politely, cleared his throat, and swallowing a mouthful of tea, said: "I suppose Admiral is correct, according to Military etiquette . . . but when one retires, things change, you know." He laughed, not too loud, just enough to sound casual. "I would say it's a matter of preference."

"Oh, I see. I've always wanted to clear that up."

"And I had hoped that you'd want to call me Mr. Appleton . . . Admiral is so . . . so . . . how shall I say it . . . formal," he said after a moment's hesitation. The Admiral was pleased.

"Tell me, Mr. Appleton, do you have any news?" Miss Bradshaw put down her cup and pushed it aside.

"Let me see . . ." the Admiral began slowly . . . "No, I don't think I do . . . No, I'm sure I don't."

"Mr. Appleton, where do you spend your time?" she asked coyly, and picked up a spoon and tapped it on the saucer.

The Admiral looked around the room. "Well, I keep busy with my hobbies . . ." He finished his tea and took a cigarette

from the elaborate holder in the middle of the table . . . "I find that engrossing enough."

"I imagine so," Miss Bradshaw said with a sigh.

"And what about you?" the Admiral asked, smiling and looking down into the bottom of his teacup at the floral designs and then at the real leaves plastered on the sides. He glanced at Miss Bradshaw.

She was staring out the window into the branches of a young oak tree. "Oh, Mr. Appleton, you know me . . . I see my friends in church, and that's about all. It's so lovely these days I couldn't even bring myself to doing a hobby."

The Admiral lit the cigarette and held the match for Miss Bradshaw. She smoked thoughtfully and silently for a moment while the Admiral examined the fine furniture in the room and the clean swept floors. Everything seemed to be polished, even the glass over the portraits on the wall.

"Yet, I know what you mean," he said, and felt very restless.

"And, there's no news . . . no one died recently, did they?"

"No, none of my friends," the Admiral said, looking directly at her. "What about you?" he added.

"No, everyone's about the same . . . getting older, of course."

"Of course . . ." the Admiral said and nodded. "Miss Bradshaw, to get down to the purpose of my visit . . . the real purpose, that is . . ."

"Yes? . . ."

The Admiral looked critically at his cigarette, then snuffed it out in the bottom of the tea cup. "Would you come to the park with me?" He squeezed his hands together in his lap.

"Well, I don't know if it's very proper," she said eloquently, and fluffed her hair and put out the cigarette.

The Admiral smiled, and his eyes twinkled. "Miss Bradshaw, may I remind you that it is a glorious spring day, and that the park is the best place to be on a glorious spring day." He paused and bent towards Miss Bradshaw and snarled: "Besides, you don't want to get Hodgkin's disease, do you?"

"Why . . . why . . . no."

"Then you have to have fresh air." The Admiral laughed. "I'm serious though . . . won't you come with me?"

"All right," she said quickly.

"Wonderful, wonderful . . ." The Admiral clapped his hands together. "I think it'll be great . . . fun . . . yes, fun!" He got up and helped Miss Bradshaw from the chair.

"Just you wait, I'll put on my coat," she said.

"Oh, you don't need one."

"Really?"

"Of course not."

"Oh, you're just an old trickster!"

"So are you . . . at heart." He picked up his stick and the box and went to the door.

The Admiral took Miss Bradshaw's arm and they walked outside and stopped to watch the quiet functions of spring, and then they headed for the park, past the velvet lawns and the staid old homes. He felt his hand press against her fragile bones and the rough material of her dress rub on his skin.

"Mr. Appleton . . ." she said as they turned into the park and followed the cinder path down to the pond . . . "Would you tell me what's in that box?"

"Oh, just wait and see," he said.

So they continued past the young couples on the benches and the derelicts sleeping on the grass, and read all the signs that said keep off and Jesus saves and vote for McCorcan. It was a warm day with a lot of sunlight and a steady breeze. The Admiral guided Miss Bradshaw to a bench overlooking the pond. They sat down, and the Admiral put the box beside him and then they stared out over the silvery water and saw the children playing on the far edges.

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?" Miss Bradshaw commented.

"Yes, it is . . . It's my favorite spot."

"I didn't know that."

"Oh, yes . . ." The Admiral nodded . . . "And I'm here for a special purpose."

"Really?" Miss Bradshaw looked at him, and moved to the edge of the bench.

The Admiral got up and took the schooner out of the box and polished the keel and walked down to the water. Miss Bradshaw followed. (Across the pond, the nurses came and led the children away.)

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to float this schooner. I've always wanted to float it."

"Won't it sink?" She seated herself on the grass.

"No, it won't sink! It's a damn fine ship."

"Yes, I suppose so . . . It's pretty, anyway."

The Admiral went down the little slope, knelt by an alcove fringed with rocks and twigs and a shelf of grass, and put the schooner on the water.

Miss Bradshaw drew up her legs, held the dress against her knees and trembled as a breeze blew across her face and rumbled her hair. She smiled and watched the Admiral launch his ship. It cut over the surface and left two white humps behind it. The Admiral stepped back and lifted his head and waited for a breeze to come along the water. The schooner almost stopped. It pivoted slowly and met the current and moved out to the middle of the pond.

"Damned fine ship," he muttered, and sat down beside Miss Bradshaw, listening to the knots crack in his knees. He touched his head lightly and fell back on his elbows.

"Look at it go!" Miss Bradshaw said.

The Admiral sat up proudly. "Damned fine ship."

"Beautiful."

"I should say so." He took Miss Bradshaw's arm and they watched the boat grow smaller as it neared the center of the pond. They could barely see the current ripple against its sides and the fuzzy white trail behind it. The Admiral picked up a handful of dirt and sifted it through his fingers, while Miss Bradshaw ran her hand over the oak twigs on the ground. The schooner slid away from the current and entered the calm water.

"It's getting so tiny out there," Miss Bradshaw said.

"Yes, it is . . ."

"I wish I could see it. It's so pretty with all that red trim . . . and such marvelous varnish."

"I worked on it quite a bit."

"I imagine so."

"Look!" Miss Bradshaw pointed across the water. (The children on the other side had gathered beneath a clump of trees to watch the boat.) "It's stopped. It isn't moving at all."

"No, it isn't," the Admiral said, staring vacantly. He smiled and then laughed. "The ducks can have it. The ducks will be an enemy fleet!"

"Oh, how horrible! . . . Mr. Appleton, how are you going to get it back?"

"I never thought of that, Miss Bradshaw . . . it completely and thoroughly slipped my mind!"

"But now look . . . it's not going to move," she said, disappointed. "Someone should get it."

"I guess someone will," the Admiral said, and began throwing pebbles in the water and watching the concentric circles spread over the surface . . .

They sat for a long time without speaking, and then a breeze went over the water and the current circled the pond. The Admiral's boat remained in the center, the sails swelling and the hull leaning to the far shore, where the children gathered by the nurse to go home to dinner. Miss Bradshaw wrapped her arms around her body and shivered in the chilly wind.

"It's getting late, Miss Bradshaw."

"Yes . . . shall we go?"

"By all means, my dear."

"Mr. Appleton, *really* . . ."

"Never mind. Never mind . . . just come along."

He got up and helped Miss Bradshaw to her feet and they left the pond. The schooner still idled in the center . . .

"Thank you very much, Mr. Appleton," she said just before he left. "It was grand." She disengaged her hand and looked into his face.

"I'm sorry we didn't do it sooner," he said.

"Well, it was too cold before."

"Of course, of course," the Admiral said, and grasped his walking stick.

"Maybe we can do it again," Miss Bradshaw said.

"A fine idea . . . too bad it gets chilly so soon."

"Well, don't worry."

"Of course not."

"Goodbye now."

"Goodbye, Miss Bradshaw," the Admiral said, and turned and walked away, whistling and twirling his cane.

He whistled all the way home, and then stopped on the front steps and held his hand above the door knob. He put the cane on his shoulder, opened the door and marched in. The Admiral listened to the sounds in the kitchen. He turned and walked up the first stairs, measuring each step.

In the kitchen, Harriet was preparing dinner, but the Admiral was not hungry. He wanted very much to go upstairs. He went into his room and found the opera glasses and then headed for the ocean, where, in due time, the spot lights would shine on the beach and the arbitrarily placed twigs and the dirt and all the gun installations, and the night would be contained by the four walls, plaster and finite.

The Admiral paused to catch his breath, and forgetting that Harriet had announced dinner in a flat, dutiful voice, entered his room to watch the battles.

JOHN H. CARTER:

Hector and Alexandros

No wasted love between those brothers there
Upon the battlements above the plain,
Where gods contend along with men and where
The Greek Achilles mourns Patroclus slain.

Nine years of war have scarred the older's head,
While Andromache's lot again must be
Blood-matted beard and dry sweat in her bed.
Premonition, then, and jealousy
Despise the cause, are father to the frown
That glimpses smiling Paris, for whose lust
The bloodhound son of Thetis stalks his kill.

Do they foresee which first will be struck down
And dragged around the city through the dust,
And who will wound Achilles in the heel?

MARY LITTLEJOHN:

An Albatross Too Frequent

If we should answer without lies
what we have loved, and why and how;
if we loved wisely, we surmise
we could not be disconsolate now.

But man, heaven's outcast wanderer,
seeks bright nothings; excuse to fail
himself or any other! prefers
frightening strangers with his shabby tale.

ROBERT C. AGEE:

The Sisters

There is hardly a woman in the world . . . in whom something of the maternal instinct does not survive, unconsumed like a salamander, in the fires of the most abandoned passion.

JOSEPH CONRAD—*Chance*

Miss Virginia Dimpfle, now watching the land slide past the window and no longer seated in her office over the papers soothing her tired fingers, leaned against the corn-colored seat and put her hands momentarily against her thighs and then on her all-bone knees as if to smooth her skirt though it did not need smoothing but was merely close and uncomfortable after the long ride. Across the way Hector wallowed in an egg salad sandwich, aware neither of the mayonnaise that trickled patiently down his chin nor of the shreds of lettuce which he could not control with his awkward young fingers. He finished the sandwich and crumpled the wax paper into a tight ball and slipped it beneath the seat, first using it for a napkin, which was not satisfactory and prompted him to clean his mouth on the once spotless sleeve of his blue blazer. Virginia sat up and scolded him, turning her head primly when he cursed. Hector squirmed and could not arrange his legs nor the gray slacks which covered them, and finally, with the abandon and realism of a seven year old, put his feet on the window sill, unnoticed until Virginia forgot the sliding scenery and made him take his feet down. He rummaged through the lunch bag, and finding nothing of interest, gazed again out the window, seeing the land only as a blur of color hopelessly mingled with the sky.

Virginia, too, looked out the window and followed the telegraph poles all the same yet somehow different go by like a row of toy soldiers, knowing that if she counted the poles the time would pass, as did the scenery and the ride would be over and she could uncramp her legs and step into the newness of the resort and forget the ancient faces and the images of the office so barren and so modern and always filled with the repetitious noise of typewriters and the muffled-crisp papers and forceful voices. She plucked a thread from her skirt and smoothed the skirt all the way to the joint of torso and legs feeling the roughness of new silk stockings beneath and the sudden cool itch when her hand reached the end of the stockings and found the bare flesh. The train went through a tunnel and the lights that had been on but unseen became real and the window was a mirror backed by dirt-gray walls and the smelly darkness and she could see the fuzzy lines of her face above the slender neck which she did not like but which she could not change and which she would carry for the rest of time. Virginia looked away and studied the suit coat also red and padded, as women's clothes often are. There was no dust or thread on the coat. It was spotless and somehow sad, hanging above the seats. She took it down, spread it on her knees and crossed her legs feeling the cramp go from one buttock to the other and search for an outlet though it could not find it through the swath of girdle she wore now because this was a special trip.

Not seeing and not knowing but just looking with animal intensity, Hector reached into the bag and pulled out an apple. He gnawed off a huge chunk and discharged it on the floor with a maximum of wind and noise that shook the blond straight hair from his forehead and contorted his face.

"Don't ever do that again," Virginia said and slapped his knee. Hector drew back against the seat until his hair merged with the color of the straw and his eyes sparkled blue, like two bright lights. "Do you hear me, Hector—*never* do that. Now I bet all the people in the car are watching you."

"It was rotten . . . and I'm tired. Why do we have to spend so long on the train for?" he said, wriggling and then settling.

"Hector, don't ask silly questions. You know it's a long trip and there's no other way to go."

"Well, I just asked," he said, and put a hand through his hair, messing the neat part Virginia had made before the train left the city. "You never tell me these things."

"Hector, you're too precocious."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you leave me alone?" He said and his voice rose and he banged the seat and slumped down so that his shoulders seemed to curl over his chest.

"It won't be long now, Hector," Virginia looked at her watch, the delicate band circling her wrist, the black in contrast to the tender untanned skin and up higher to the plain white blouse. "Why, it's just six o'clock now . . . see." She held out the wrist and the watch, listening to the vague tick and waiting for Hector's reaction. "Do you see, Hector?"

"Yes, but I can't tell time," he said and compressed his thin lips.

"Oh Hector, you *can* tell time," Virginia said in a sweet voice. "Why your Mommy told me you could do *everything*."

"No she didn't. You're a liar and so is she."

"Hector, shush!" Virginia looked away from his round, insistent face and saw the man ahead of them scratch his red-speckled baldness. "People will hear you."

"I don't care. I don't like trains."

"How do you know, Hector, you haven't been on one for a long time."

"That don't matter. I hate trains." He squirmed again, and tore a scrap of paper from the lunch bag and shredded it and sprinkled the pieces on the floor already cluttered and crowded by four anxious feet. She leaned back and sighed to herself and as the train went through a tunnel she looked at her nose which was long and classic until it reached the tip where it turned into a hard little bump. Then they were in the sunlight not full but tempered by evening clouds and sifted through countless colors. The whistle sounded through the car. Virginia looked at Hector, wondering what to say and how to say it and wondering whether to handle him as his mother could and would not do. She bent forward and examined his face.

"Hector, you listen to Virginia . . . We're going to see your Aunt and I don't want you to act like you have on the train. Now, do you understand?" She leaned back and waited, knowing that her face was bothered because she wanted to say something convincing but did not have adequate words.

"Oh O.K., you win." He drove a tight little fist into the seat and then looked at the place he had struck as if sorry he had done it and as if the place might be alive and sentient. "I don't know why we have to come if we can't go swimming. The beach ain't fun if you can't swim." He struggled to loosen his tie, but the knot would not give, so he persevered, crossing his legs and waiting for Virginia to answer his question. "Why didn't we come when there was swimming. I wanted to go swimming."

"Hector, I want to tell you something," Virginia said softly, keeping a conscious eye on the man with the red-speckled baldness, hoping he would not turn around but hoping he would think she was a mother and hoping he would understand a mother's problem, though she was not a mother and only dreamed of problems.

"Are you listening, Hector?"

"Yes, I'll listen." Hector rumbled his hair and moved his head to one side.

"We couldn't go swimming before because Virginia had to work . . . now you understand that? And no one else was able to take you. Besides, you can go swimming if you really want to. But I'm terribly afraid you'll catch cold, and we wouldn't want that to happen, would we?"

"Why not? Then I wouldn't have to go to school." Hector sulked, then sat up, smiling just enough to show his teeth.

"You *have* to go to school," she began, then stopped. "You won't catch cold, Hector."

"Good. Then I can go swimming."

"Yes, Hector," Virginia said, glancing out the window to see if she recognized the scenery, and not having passed it in a year, could not, and returned to Hector, who was staring at her, wondering things she would never understand.

"And maybe there'll be some girls."

"Oh yes, Hector. I wouldn't be at all surprised." She ran her fingertips over the powder-caked skin beneath her eyes and then down her nose, instinctively avoiding the lips, and fondling the chin, small and indistinct, and deciding that she had smoothed her skirt enough. She watched Hector smiling. He bit off a portion of his fingernail and carefully spat it against the window pane, laughing first to himself, then to the people in the car. Virginia shook her head, careful not to disorder the hair across her forehead. "Yes, you might even meet some girls—but you have to be nice to Aunt Gertrude before anything else."

"Ah heck, I always gotta do something. Why can't I just do what I want?"

"Because people can't always do what they want, Hector. I've explained these things to you."

"Yes, Virginia," he said quietly, and began to sulk again, his chin cradled in his hand. Virginia smoothed her hair and plotted the things she would say and then the conductor came for the ticket stubs and she lost her thoughts.

"I guess we're almost there, Hector."

"I'm glad." Hector looked in the lunchbag a final time, smashed it into a tight ball and cast it aside, and did not see Virginia get mad.

Virginia controlled herself as she always did and gazed out the window, watching the level fields and the dead or dying trees disappear and the first signs of the city take their place. She stirred, keeping her eyes on the window, noticing her reflection become distinct as the sun went down beyond a little rise of hills and the lights come on strongly in the car. Turning to Hector, she said: "You sit still now. We're almost there and I want you to look nice for Aunt Gertrude."

She wet her handkerchief with her tongue and cleaned the smudges from his face. Then they gathered up the baggage and got ready to leave the train which was now passing through the negro section and now through the new housing development where the lights shone monotonously in the first darkness. When it stopped in the station they beat the crowd and walked alone down the platform, Virginia clasping Hector's arm with her free hand and looking up at the vaulted ceiling and wishing she had not waited so long to come and she smelled the fresh dirt smell of a station and admired the row of frosted lights and could sense the merry people on the streets near the beach.

They went through the waiting room and past the Milk Bar that enticed Hector but not Virginia and out onto the street where they looked for a taxi. Hector set down his small traveling bag and looked up at Virginia whose eyes were elsewhere, perhaps on the sky, perhaps on the facade of a new and strange building, or just absorbing the fresh air that bathed her skin and dried her moist-wrinkled hands.

"How long we gonna be here?" Hector inquired as she saw a taxi stop by the curb down the street.

"Oh, I'm not sure. As long as Gertrude will have us, I guess," she said, taking Hector by the arm and leading him to the taxi before anyone else got there. They climbed in and seated themselves on the hard leather cushions and Virginia leaned forward and gave the driver Gertrude's address and the driver flicked the meter and drove away with only a grunt and the sharp conditioned movements of his hands on the wheel and gear-shift. Settling back, Virginia put her arm around Hector's neck and put her face close to his and looked for a long time, then said: "Why did you ask how long we were going to stay?—there'll be time to go to the beach, don't worry."

"I don't wanna' stay. I wanna' go home."

"Hush, Hector, that's not a nice thing to say."

"It's true, I don't want to stay." He spoke louder this time and Virginia slid her hand across his mouth and looked apprehensively at the driver seeing only the ragged tweed cap and the black-gray hair covering his neck. She pulled her jacket across her chest and slowly removed the hand from Hector's mouth and when they got to Gertrude's house she paid the driver from the little purse she carried and they walked up the

flagstone path onto the porch, her arm around Hector's back feeling her whole body go limp as she stooped to approach his height. They paused on the front steps and Virginia watched the light burn indifferently above the door. She opened the screen door and rang the bell and waited and then the door opened and Gertrude was there, a slender woman with fair skin and sharp features except her nose which was a graceful slope.

"Hello, Virginia! It's so good to see you again," she said and held the door wide open and drew Virginia to her and hugged her. Hector stood in the shadows, intrigued by the new mailbox and the latch that went click-click when it was pushed. Gertrude stepped back and looked Virginia up and down, her arms extended and resting lightly on Virginia's shoulders. "Oh come in, come in, Virginia. I'm just so glad to see you all again. Lord it's been so long now . . . I didn't mean to keep you waiting. You must be starved." She sighed and removed her hands from Virginia's shoulders and brought them against her own sides and then led Virginia into the hall, Hector following.

"Why Hector!" Gertrude exclaimed. "Where were you hiding? I'm so excited to see you again." She bent down and kept her dress pinned to her knees and managed to kiss Hector on the chin. She stood up and took them into the living room, which was warm and snug after the evening air. The rugs were thick and richly colored and the furniture was clumsy but comfortable and there was an assortment of pictures on the wall and even a portrait of a staid old gentleman with folded arms and a look of unbounded wisdom, conjured and posed.

"Sit anywhere, please. Try to make yourself at home." Gertrude indicated the sofa, and Virginia and Hector seated themselves with quiet courtesy and looked around and took in the room which she had not seen for a year and which he had never seen.

"It's just about the same. So lovely, Gertrude . . . the rooms, I mean," Virginia said when the silence had become awkward and Hector needed something to fill his ears and keep him from speaking with impropriety. He scratched his hair out of place and tugged his earlobe, leaning first forward and then tumbling backwards against the drab-colored pillows until he was moving like a pendulum.

"No, it hasn't changed much. It does get lonely though without mother."

"I know," Virginia said, crossing her legs to avoid stillness.

"It's kinda' small," Hector said.

"Hector! You be quiet! Now won't you do that like a good boy?"

He said nothing, swaying with logical determination.

"He's sweet, Virginia . . . you shouldn't get mad with him," Gertrude said, smiling and pushing back her hair until it rested coyly along her shoulders. Her face was bright and colorful but had no makeup except the polished red on her lips. Virginia smiled also.

"Hmmm . . . something smells good." She raised her nose and pried the air and looked at the curtain stretched across the doorway leading to the dining room.

"Oh, which reminds me. I've got a roast on. Excuse me a minute." She walked out of the room, tall and straight, speaking now through the curtain on the way to the kitchen.

"I can't tell you how nice it is to see you again." Her voice was clear and distinct like the sound of bells and Virginia moved forward on the edge of the sofa to listen. She restrained Hector with her arm. She heard the tinkle of silver and plates and a loud clatter of a dishpan.

"Oh, let me help, Gertrude." She said and went into the kitchen, leaving Hector to watch the light glisten on the window and on the glassed-in bookshelves, forming confused images. Hector stopped swaying, tried again to loosen his tie but could not, and with a sigh more a whistle, hoisted his legs to the table

and began striking the pillows, sending up clouds of dust. He turned his body against the soft backrest and closed his eyes.

Virginia and Gertrude came back to the room, Virginia not as tall but fuller and her bright red skirt clashing with the pastel designs on Gertrude's dress.

"Why don't you run upstairs and get cleaned, Hector . . . Like a good boy." Virginia said, bending over and putting her hands on her knees and smiling at the boy as she would at a dog. Hector looked back unsmiling from the pillows.

"Ah shucks . . . alright." He got up and marched out of the living room into the darkened hall. Virginia followed, and pointing up the stairs, said: "First door, Hector. You can't miss it. Now show Aunt Gertrude that you can get all washed without help."

"Yes, 'Ginia," Hector said, and went up the stairs.

Virginia returned to the living room unbuttoning the top of her blouse because she was suddenly hot. She sat down in the easy chair and watched Gertrude's rectangular face loosen and heard her breath come freely and easily.

"Good God! What a relief to be alone for a change!" Virginia flung her arms along the rests and threw her head back, looking up at the yellow creased ceiling.

Gertrude looked in the hall for a moment, then hurried over to a small table next to the couch and pulled out the drawer and found something in a paper bag. She took it and held it against her side, looking shyly at Virginia, her green eyes shining and her hair shaking against her shoulder blades.

"Thirsty?" she said, both a statement and a question.

"God, yes, yes, yes." Virginia said almost moaning, uncrossing her legs and opening them so that any breeze might drift along her flesh and cool it. She unbuttoned another button on her blouse, and breathed deeply, conscious of the wheezing noise that filled the room now quiet except for the crinkle of paper and the pop of a bottle cap.

"I thought you might be. That must have been a hell of a ride."

"It wasn't that bad, really. Hector will grow up. He's going to be a very nice young man . . . but it's so hard to do what's right. It's such a strain."

"Most likely is . . . How much do you want?"

"A wee bit," Virginia said, indicating the amount with her thumb and forefinger spread parallel.

Gertrude found two paper cups and filled them up. She handed one to Virginia and then seated herself and sipped the liquor and handled the finely shaped bottle with the Victorian designs on the label, the gold and red print and the boar's head like a medieval medallion. "Tastes good, doesn't it?"

"Yes it does, thanks," Virginia said.

"Well, how have you been, dear? We can talk now."

"About routine. That's all."

"And how's Diane?"

"Fine."

"Well, she always is."

"Yes. But let's just forget it."

"Sure, Ginny. We'll forget it . . . God, I really am excited . . . and you look so well."

"So do you, Gerty." They looked at each other with feminine vanity and concern and drank the liquor and felt their bodies warm all over.

"Look, Ginny . . . I wish I had gotten your letter earlier. Maybe we could have whipped up something interesting."

"Don't worry, Gerty. We can find something. At least this place is *different*," Virginia said, and touched the little puffs of flesh under her eyes and looked at Gertrude's sleek face.

"Which reminds me, dear. Al left some tickets."

"I meant to ask about Al. How are things coming?"

"God only knows." Gertrude shrugged her shoulders and spread her hands and frowned playfully.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have asked."

"Don't be silly, Ginny! We women just plug along."

Virginia smiled. "What about these tickets," she said, not showing all her interest, just the polite part.

"Oh yes, Al got us tickets to the Cavalier ball, and get *this*—to the boxing matches." She giggled.

"Good God!" Virginia laughed also, and lit a cigarette, holding it between the graceful fingers and letting the smoke come up over the knuckles tensed blue with anxiety. "All kinds of things. I really didn't mean to laugh."

"It is funny, isn't it? He wanted to go tonight so he left the tickets in case we wanted to meet him. I can't see it myself . . . these men."

"Yes," Virginia said, and looked at Gertrude through the smoke stinging her eyes. "I know what you mean."

"And these things to the Cavalier are even worse . . . I guess it's formal. In fact, I know it is." Her voice went on deep and exotic, but Virginia was not listening. "And I don't have anything formal. God! Does he expect us to go *alone* . . . these men."

Then Virginia sat up stiffly and quickly like awakening from a semi-sleep and not knowing the time or place and feeling that it is new though really not because the eye is dimmed and must reconstruct the frame of reference.

"He's awfully independent, isn't he?" Virginia said, drinking the last of the liquor burning her stomach causing splinters of silver to go across her half-closed eyes.

"I'd say so." Gertrude scanned the room, not wanting to say anymore.

Virginia came forward in the chair. "Let's just wander!" she said impulsively, and then knew that she could not retract what she had said.

"Ginny! I'm surprised at you." Gertrude said. "But it sounds like fun . . . what are we going to do with Hector?" she added.

"Oh yes . . . Hector . . . he can be a nuisance, can't he?"

"Yes, Ginny, but why don't we take him to the movies and pick him up later? . . . I wouldn't want to leave him here alone."

"Neither would I . . . I don't know . . . but I guess the movies will be O.K."

"That's it then. C'mon help me put the dinner on the table."

"Fine," Virginia said and went with Gertrude to the kitchen and carried out the roast and placed it in the middle of the table as if it were an offering and then she called Hector and he trudged down the stairs not looking much cleaner than he had before. When the meal was finished and the dishes stained with the thick-smelling remnants were heaped in the sink, Virginia leaned over to Hector and said: "How would you like to go to the movies tonight? Wouldn't that be nice?"

"No."

"Well, I guess it's your bedtime, Hector."

"I'll run up and make his bed," Gertrude added.

"No! I'm not going to bed," Hector said.

"Alright, then, you can go to the movies. There isn't anything else to do tonight. You can go swimming tomorrow."

"O.K. I'll go to the movies," Hector said, discouraged, stroking his hair, tugging his earlobe.

"Fine, Hector . . . you've been a good boy tonight," Virginia said and smiled warmly so that her cheeks swelled and her teeth glistened beneath the pale lights.

"Good. I'll back the car out," Gertrude said, her fingers resting on her chin while she thought of all the details. "Ginny, take those tickets from the drawer, will you?"

"O.K. Gerty," she said, and got the tickets, feeling a knot form in her stomach. She took off her watch and put it on the table.

Gertrude went to the garage in the rear and backed out the Cadillac, vintage 1934, with the anachronistic white-walled tires freshly painted and the roof that looked like ancient tar paper and she blew the horn and Virginia led Hector down the front steps and listened to her heels click through the Indian summer night where the trees just turning brown and gold and all harvest colors were like tapestries in a dark room. They got in the front seat and headed downtown. On Ocean Avenue they heard the first noises from the dance halls and saw the people stream

in and out of the amusement spots and blinked at the flagrant colors. They parked on a side street and guided Hector to the Rosemont theatre. Virginia took him aside.

"Hector, I don't want you to worry me, so be a good boy and don't get lost or anything. We'll pick you up at midnight. This is a double feature and you can see both pictures. Alright, Hector? Virginia will buy you a ticket and make sure you get in safely."

Hector nodded though still absorbed in the gorgeous photos behind the glass. Virginia stood up, first watching his expression, then noticing her reflection on the glass, tall and full and somehow not normal but abnormal because it lacked proportion. She smiled and felt the strangeness come in on her and saw the lights along the street reflect and clash. Hector walked by her side to the swank cylindrical booth and Virginia bought a child's ticket from the fat woman whose lips were caked with red and whose eyes were conditioned to the babble on the street.

Then with the child's infinite love of the macabre he entered the theatre to hear the roar of guns and violent music and watch the shadows move in illusion across the screen.

"Feel better now, dearie?" Gertrude asked when they had walked a short way down Ocean Avenue.

"Oh much, Gerty. But I wish I didn't have to worry about the boy."

"Don't. It isn't worth it. He'll be alright."

"Oh, it's worth it, Gerty," Virginia said, looking idly and happily about her and then glancing at her friend's sloped nose and red-tinted hair and fine delicate lips. "But I'll try not to worry . . . just for now."

"That's the girl. We'll really make it a night. I feel so good . . . kinda free," Gertrude confided as they stopped by the curb and prepared to cross the street.

"So am I . . . to tell the truth," Virginia said when they reached the other side.

"We won't need tickets or anything," Gertrude said. "We'll just have a great time."

"Agreed," Virginia said.

"C'mon, we can go down this street."

So they went down an alley and came out on Brite Avenue and walked past the cheap hotels and past several dance halls and then they cut over to the boardwalk and could see the ocean glitter black beneath the black sky where the stars lay like seeds and occasionally one cut the sky and disappeared dying in sparks. The waves echoed on the beach like a choral background and the music came out of the dance halls where eager young men and women gorged themselves on beer and pretzels. Virginia and Gertrude walked along the shake-rattle boards, stopping to lean over the rail and stare down the darkened beach and turn away when they saw the ostentatious couples wrapped in blankets or heard the chilly laughter come up from beneath the boardwalk. They turned away, discreet and alert, walked slowly and gazed at the few quilted clouds.

"Where shall we go, Gerty?" Virginia asked, drawing back her shoulders to match Gertrude's height and stature and now suddenly aware of her body and a warm chill on her skin and the gooseflesh along her sides.

"How about the Chateau?" Gertrude pointed. "Right over there."

"Good enough. You know the places, not me."

Gertrude grabbed her arm, laughing, looking sideways at the men who passed all the same yet somehow different. Virginia looked also, not at Gertrude but at the people drifting by and at the faces well defined like current trends and at the thematic faces and at the great emptiness and darkness between the people. They crossed the bleached grass lawn and up the stairs and into the dance hall smelling the odors women left in their wakes and they saw the people around the floor above which the bugs swirled in warfare and upon which the couples danced and talked as strangers would, for the hall was filled with strangers who suddenly came together and then would drift

apart and not return but would first perhaps seek the comforts of the beach and later wash by the clean white surf and hear the waves join the sand.

They looked for an empty table, found it, and ordered a large pitcher of beer. Virginia pulled the red jacket across her bosom and drank some of the beer and watched the couples parade on the floor and then move to the sides where the tables were, splitting up, the men returning to men and the women to women. The music spoke of undefined madness and longing, and Virginia listened, absorbed.

"Ginny, you'll stay more than three days, won't you?" Gertrude said when Virginia had forgotten time and knew only of the figures around the near tables.

"What?" she asked, returning from distraction and abstraction to the very real table and beer and Gertrude's flushed face. "Three days . . . oh no . . . I can't stay more . . . when did I say three days?"

"In the letter."

"Oh well, there'll be work to do . . . and anyway, Hector has to get home to his mother."

"Yes, that's right . . . isn't it? Pardon me for forgetting."

Gertrude tilted her head and pushed the hair back on her shoulders, and as she did so Virginia watched her torso move gently beneath the dress.

"That's alright. I do wish it could be longer myself. Maybe later when I get a long vacation."

"And no Hector."

"Well . . . no Hector."

They drank a toast and lit cigarettes and tried to follow the movements of the men at the distant tables as they left to search for partners, the gay young men drinking and dancing into self-destruction, moving with the urgency of doctors. Two came to their table and Virginia looked at Gertrude whose face was suddenly hard and frantic and she would not look at the men in the plain jackets and plain shirts wearing their hair trim and close and asking would you dance please.

"We don't even know you," Gertrude said, looking away from the rim of her glass and kicking Virginia's legs beneath the table.

"Oh don't worry about that," the blue-eyed one said. "My name is Eddie and this is Mike. We're kinda new to the town. Ah, heck, c'mon and dance, everyone else is."

"It's not very proper," Gertrude said.

"Let your hair down," Mike said without a smile, lighting a cigarette with unsteady hands and shrugging his jacket up on his wide shoulders.

"What do you say," Eddie continued. "This is pretty good music here. Let's just dance once. Hell, we're strangers here ourselves. Don't you want to show us a good time. Mike's O.K. Don't mind his face . . . he used to play football." Now chuckling, Eddie turned to Mike and nudged him softly.

"Eddie's a joker. I think we should dance. Kinda' shake up the place . . . it's in the cards," Mike said.

Eddie studied the floor and rubbed his fuzz-blond face and looked up when Gertrude said: "What do you think, Ginny?"

She heard Gertrude say my name's Gertrude and someone else say I live where I hang my hat and then she was out on the floor walled in by the other couples but not aware of the wall because she told herself it did not matter. She felt her all-bone knees spring light and buoyant with the music and the strong arm circle her waist not as a watch strap would band her wrist but as something free and undefined that would carry her away from walls and other people and from herself. Virginia could not see Gertrude in the crowd and when she closed her eyes there was nothing to see anyway only the weight of another body to feel against her and the soft fuzz-blond face sliding against her hair. The music stopped at intervals and each interval was a convenient marker like a Sunday or a birthday or a war and this interval became the last interval and the next interval became this interval until they were out on the shake-rattle boards surveying the beach and the couples and the white

waves below the stars lying like seeds in the sky and there was no Gertrude.

"I have tickets to the Cavalier. Would you like to go?" she said.

"That's formal, isn't it?" Eddie said, and Virginia felt his arm wire the red jacket to the small of her back and she was looking at him not as a woman but as Woman and seeing behind him the night.

"I don't think so," she heard herself say. "We could try anyway," and then not hearing herself, "C'mon, Eddie, let's go."

"Alright. It's good for a whirl. All they can do is refuse." They laughed together and went towards the largest lights almost by instinct and she could sense the music coming from the pastel walls and the furniture and the couples moving in gemmed costumes and bowing gracefully where the music never stopped but rang on like bells.

"It's a great night, isn't it?" Eddie said. He took her hand and she looked at him ignoring the men who went past in uncolored clothes and geometric not gothic ties. On each side were the hotels and the dance halls the framework of a modern pastoral and somewhere in front of them the Cavalier.

"It is nice, isn't it?" She talked—and he talked in reply. There were more people around them, the women in slacks or warm skirts and the men with hands in pockets as if all work had ceased and there was only leisure ahead. They went through the darkness without reflection and Virginia was unconscious and conscious of her body at the same time and the paradox not resolved but left for the others to decide if they could while they sat on the rail swatting bugs though she knew they were in a different medium.

The Cavalier was directly in front of them. It was a large building and bright and the lights shone out on the water and the shake-rattle boards were dim orange and not black like the sky. Eddie talked and Virginia talked also and neither listened except to the music blurred by distance and his arm fastened around her like a watch band. She looked straight ahead at the rows of lighted windows above the first floor where the music grew louder and she thought she could see the courtly couples blend with the walls and bend towards each other until a clock struck and she pulled away from Eddie's grip and stood separate.

"What time is it, Eddie? Is that twelve o'clock? Please tell me, Eddie."

"Yeah, I think so . . . hell, don't worry. That place stays open to all hours."

"No, no, I didn't mean that . . . you sure it's twelve?"

"Hell, yes!" Eddie said, perplexed. He reached for her waist but she drew back and looked towards the Cavalier where the lights still shone in long rows.

"I don't see any clock. How do you know it's twelve?"

"I just do. I got a watch. That's how I know. C'mon Ginny, let's go down the beach. You look a little tired."

"No, no, Eddie. I've got to go. Here, I'll give you my address," she said frantically. "No, No, I can't do that. I've got to go."

"What's the matter? What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing Eddie."

"Well, where the hell are you going in such a rush?"

"I've got to meet Hector."

"Oh, you should have told me. I didn't know."

"You don't see what I mean. He'll get lost. He's my nephew and he shouldn't be out so late anyway."

"Alright, I'll go with you."

Virginia shook her head. "You don't understand. I've just got to go. Just leave, Eddie."

She turned and ran off the boardwalk and over a grass lawn and down the mice-infested alley where a solitary bicyclist steered through the night and then out on Ocean Avenue where she stopped to catch her breath and smooth her hair. She looked at the buildings and the glare of lights and the automobiles and the people all very distinct and separate and she was not unconscious but aware of everything outside her. She smiled as best she could, feeling the blood throb in her temples. For a moment she looked up and down the avenue, saw the lights go out above the Rosemont theatre, and began walking in that direction. The crowd scattered along the sidewalk, but she did not see Hector. First she looked in the lobby, then asked the ticket woman if she had seen a child and the ticket woman shook her head and Virginia walked onto the street, grasping her pocketbook, remembering faintly what had happened. She went past a dark shop and then past a drug store and suddenly stopped and hurried back into the drugstore and dragged Hector off a hard-leather stool.

"Where have you been, Hector? Where have you been!" she said, trembling, slapping Hector across the small of the back.

"Stop it, stop it! I was right here . . . you were late."

"Shush! and don't talk back."

"I'm not talking back," he squeaked. Virginia took him outside and fixed his tie and brushed his gray trousers and then stood up, still trembling, glancing over his shoulder at her own reflection in the drugstore window. She drew the red jacket across her chest because the wind had started and she was cold.

"That settles it, Hector. You can't go out alone any more. God, I don't know what to do . . . we've got to leave . . . Right now . . . We can catch the late bus."

"I didn't do anything wrong."

"Shush. You just can't take care of yourself. We'll take the bus right now. We shouldn't stay here anymore." She squeezed his arm and walked him out to the curb and waited for a taxi and when one came she forced him into the back seat and gave the driver Gertrude's address. Then they drove away from the lights and the colors and the waves running over the sand and the smell of beer and all the music. When they got to Gertrude's she rushed inside and gathered her baggage and put on her watch and looked once more at the rooms. She hurried back to the taxi and asked the driver to take them to the bus terminal. Reclining, she put her arm around Hector and smiled into his face.

"You're sleepy, aren't you?"

"No," he said, falling to one side, his eyes barely open. "I wanna go swimming. Why do we have to leave?"

"Never mind Hector. This just isn't a good place for you."

"You're a liar," he said, and went to sleep.

She nudged him awake when they got to the bus terminal and helped him out onto the cold-lighted pavement and then paid the driver from the little purse she carried. Hector yawned and sat down while Virginia went for the tickets and returned smiling.

They got on the bus and walked down the darkened aisle and found seats to the rear, settling in the plush cushions. Hector quietly went to sleep, and Virginia watched the driver collect the tickets and watched the people file into the bus and then it started up and the scenery began to move past in the night. She reached over and pulled Hector against her side and he woke up for a minute and looked at her face, the little bump on the end of her nose shining in the darkness.

"Why didn't we stay, 'Ginia?" He mumbled. "Why don't you tell me why we're going?" His eyes closed and his jaws worked and the blond hair fell across his forehead and Virginia touched his face and squeezed his hand and felt warm in the stomach. Then she, too, began to sleep, leaning against the soft cushions, listening to her breath flow into the night.

WILLIAM J. GOODREAU:

Betty The Skater

I
Betty the skater, ankles bent, would stop
And sink in snow. Her icy hands would free
The strings which laced her and press back the blood
That bumped along her veins. With nets of trees
She'd scrape the gloved and buckled hearts that preened
The white-splashed ice. And those that moved in circles
Would wield a wind which melted her gray eyes—
She would be the glove a swift-skater held, a bell
Which jumped on girded hair. She would be the lover.

II
"It is cold in the night sky. The tree
Has bled. O God, the tree has bled.
My watery blood has made a pond
Where lovers skate. Beneath
This tree, these limbs I hang my love
Naked for birds of Spring to take.
I die to melt and run free again
Like the surge that breathes the melted ice."

III
Betty the skater weeps in bed
And spins the globe on Atlas. Forced
To dream, she chases gold-cuffed birds
That float in a reed pool. Their wings
Are mottled-blue and spread like floats
That Cleopatra rides. She throws
Her unfurled arms out straight and spins
To press them near. In their eyes real black
Is set. They slap the water, whack
Up waves that lave her thighs. She breaks
Those fettered wings, and tastes the blood.

JANET S. FYNE: The Resolution

The quietude of certainty
Is vibrant longitude
Of single note of violin
Wending never into utter stillness
Sostenuto infinite and unresolved.

Sanguine doubt
But spawns and multiplies itself
Mechanically amoeboid
Never learning respite
From cyclic and malignant slaughter.

And equal stoic measures
Of certainty and doubt
Locked in death-struggle
Of obscene atonality
Transgress the bevelled edge
Of possible time-charged progression
Leaving but pale residual dust
Which filters easily
Through tight-clenched fingers.

Yet single note is but removed from symphony—
Legend and history abound in sanguine cycle . . .

Mechanical futility of struggle
Smooth-cool, impenetrable as snow
When snuffed out like a taper
Reveals in welcomed darkness:
Familiar legend vivified by well-remembered melody,
The radiant synthesis
Of fusion into flame.

ROBERT MEZEY:

The Ape

Rank rich and high, the vine, the bush and spray
Once bearing scent of the orang-utang
Bloom thick although now he is gone away.

From such vegetables they saw him hang,
Far hunters from the New York city zoo.
They brought down all his fury with a bang.

That was his home and nothing else will do
To quiet the passion streaming in his veins:
O he would have them let the swift blood through.

Now he is brought inside whenever the rains
Hammer their violence upon his cage.
Now he is far away from growth. His brains

Ache with the energy of hopeless rage,
His limbs seem destitute on the tight mesh,
The square and public den: his tidy stage.

He will not strut, he will not flex his lush
And padded muscles for the common crowd,
His fierce vitals on fire in his fierce flesh.

Unreconciled and sullen, he is too proud,
Too great a body to betray his sick
And fatigued fibres. He will not be cowed.

Yet he well knows that with the spit and prick
Of ice cold water bursting on his wrath,
That with a ring of guards whose lithe whips flick,

It is not much longer to wait for death.
Untamable, strong, he shuts his cornered eyes,
Straining his ragged lungs to provide breath.

Furiously screaming for that paradise:
Delirious he sees his green hills rise.

SHEPARD B. KOMINARS:

The Apostate in Reflection

With electrical contempt the pastime sniggers "tilt,"
And bibliifies the telegram that message-waiters long have known;
This is their 'what hath god wrought'.
Oh no, there is no higher court to plead the case of Adam,
Our very breath gives life the die and therein lies the sentence,
For chance will always have it so and casts the evil throw of "2".
Doomed are we for breathing—and this the only sin,
For with this wind we kindle love, the vulture-fed impossible.
Towered Time's enchanted chimes pretend, in diminishing
thirteenth

With clerical propriety, to sanctify the game.
Could a lover on his mistress suspend such awful purpose?
The weight of such a judgment could only drag a river.

I pause out her door:—"Yes, I'll be back tomorrow night."

The adventure cross the snow must be sharp and Boonish—
Avoid the path but "keep it clean."
Inside the jungled thoughts inside so much in need of thaw,
I pilgrimage to where the sink's hot water scalds the bowl;
Away from laughter's theatre, the make-up grimes my eyes
And dares them both to witness now the cause of my disguise.
The wine was drained too quickly, the wafer was profaned;
Too soon has lost the brilliance that all but shadows fade.
The mirror has been shattered and only I remain—
Isaac in the idol shop.

JARRAD DENHARD:

Mirror

"It is not the same," she thought. "You just think that the other one was green. But you don't know. You just think it was. You were too young and too hurt to really remember the other accident."

The girl beside her moaned and the nurse reached for another wad of cotton. She forgot about the green walls of the room and bent over the girl.

"It's all right, honey. You're going to be all right." She knew that she was just a hand and a voice to the girl on the table. A hand to squeeze because she was afraid and a voice to tell her that the blood and the pain and the white light and the green walls didn't make any difference. She was going to be all right.

She could not help feeling that it was strange too. It should be this girl's mother who was talking to her now, telling her things that she couldn't hear because she was some place else that was red and white but not green. But that was not why she thought it strange. She could not get over the feeling that she was in the wrong place. She belonged here, in this room, all right, but not sitting beside the stretcher, sounding like a mother, feeling like one, worrying like one. She belonged where Bobby was, there on the stretcher, with the light in her eyes and the voices around her, telling her that everything was going to be all right. And the walls were green too.

The phone rang and the nurse went into the little office to answer. The girl on the table cried out and the voice began again without thinking. It said the same thing over and over. The girl had not asked a question and there was no answer to what she wanted to know.

"Try to relax, Bobby. Just hang on and try to relax. They'll be here soon."

How many times had she said that? How long had she been sitting there, waiting for them to come? A half hour, an hour? Longer probably. She could not remember when they had come here. Someone had told her once that there was no present, only the past, and she wondered if this was what was meant. The whole thing seemed so far away, rememberable only in scenes, like snapshots that could be surveyed in any order, one at a time or all together, as if the photographer had superimposed one on top of another.

There was nothing familiar about the first scene, the crash and then the silent shaken examination of first one and then another until they were all standing in the snow, looking back at the car, and wondering how it could have happened to them. She could remember the quiet and the cold and the tall boy asking her if she was all right. He was wiping the blood from the cut on her face when Bobby called.

Then there had been Bobby, crying softly with her hand over her face so that they could not see until she took her hand away and it had been red. They made her sit down in the car and they had tried to stop the blood and then it had been twelve o'clock. She had known that it was twelve o'clock because it was New Year's Eve and the people in the houses that had seemed so far away were celebrating and she laughed. She looked at the blood and the snow and the tall boy and she laughed. The tall boy said Happy New Year.

The police car came and the policeman with the cigar in his mouth said Happy New Year, too. She got in the car and held Bobby in her arms and talked to her, but suddenly the voice was not her own and the policeman was not a policeman anymore. She tried to listen to what he was saying, so that he would become a policeman again, but he was too far away. He was in the front seat and she was in the back seat and the blood was cold on her face. She wished that she could remember why the man in the front seat was not a policeman. It had something to do with her being in the back seat with blood on her face.

"How is she?" The question came from the front seat. It was a very simple question, but she had not understood it.

"What?"

"How is the girl?"

"She's getting weaker. I think she is losing a lot of blood." And part of her looked down at Bobby to see if this were true. Bobby stirred and asked if they were there yet, and she said that they weren't but it wouldn't be long. She wondered why no one had noticed before that she and Bobby looked alike. She had not noticed it herself until she had looked down. But Bobby was grown up now. She must have been quite small when she looked like Bobby.

"We're almost there. Is she unconscious?" The man in the front seat was talking to her again.

"Not quite."

They had driven to a stop in a courtyard. There was a light over a small door and she remembered that the door should have been small. She wasn't nervous any more because the door was small and that was right. They had carried Bobby up the steps. They were very steep steps and the girl was much heavier than she had remembered. Then they were inside and Bobby was on the white stretcher with the white nurses leaning over her and as she watched them, she felt as if she were in some sort of whirling dream. But she saw that the walls were green and the whirling stopped. The picture came into focus and Bobby began to call. "Jim." The girl was calling for Jim. At first she could not remember who Jim was, but of course he was Bobby's brother.

"He's coming, honey. He'll be here soon." She wondered if she should take off her glasses. Glasses were like mirrors. They saw what the nurses saw and what she saw and what the girl on the table was not supposed to see. But she left her glasses on because that is what the girl on the table had wanted.

She remembered her reflection in her mother's glasses, answering her question.

She sat on the stool by the stretcher watching the girl on the stretcher and trying to concentrate on the efficient motions of the nurses. The hand that she held squeezed hers and she gripped it as hard as she could, thinking that it was a very small hand.

"We had better take a blood pressure before the doctor comes." One of the nurses moved away from the table. The other nurse looked at her.

"Are you all right?"

She didn't know. She had thought she was until she had seen the green walls, but now she was not sure.

"I'm all right."

"Can you hold this while I take off her shoes?"

"I can hold it."

The nurse gave her a wad of cotton and she held it against the place on the girl's head where the blood was. She wondered why people were afraid of the sight of blood. The sight of your own blood usually frightened you. She had expected to be upset, but it was as if she had seen it before and she was not upset.

"Jane?" It was the girl on the table.

"I'm right here, Bobby."

"Does mother know?"

"They called her. She's on her way. She'll be here soon." Her mother would be there soon and her mother did not wear glasses so everything would be all right.

"Try to relax. Do you hurt anywhere else?"

"My leg." The nurse looked at her legs and moved them, first one and then the other, but they were only bruised.

The nurse said that they had better take off Bobby's coat. She got up and stood on one side of the stretcher and the nurse stood on the other side and they took off the coat. It was brown and the blood made rusty patches on the front. She was angry because the coat had been new. It seemed too large now, but she supposed that the other one did not fit anymore. It had been very small. The nurse took the coat away. Far far away so that for a moment she was not there any more.

She supposed that she must have sat down on the stool again but she could not remember having done it. She did not feel as if she were sitting down and the hand felt different too. Now it felt bigger, much bigger and stronger and calmer than hers.

Only the voice was the same. It said the same things it had said before and she did not hear them now. She tried to hear what the voice was saying because it was a voice that she knew and maybe it was saying something that would make her feel better. She felt very small and very alone and very tired. The voice was telling her to squeeze the hand hard if she hurt. It would make her feel better. She did not really hurt any more. The hurt was gone, but she tried it anyway and she felt better. She was glad that there was someone there with her. Someone that she knew. She opened her eyes, but all she could see was the bright light against the green and she shut her eyes again because the light hurt them.

Someone came into the room. It must have been the nurse because she said that the doctor was coming. She was glad that the doctor was coming. She was very tired and she couldn't go to sleep until the doctor came. She did not know how she knew that. Someone must have told her. She wondered how long they would keep her here. She must go home tonight because she was going away tomorrow. She could not remember where it was that she was going but she wanted very much to go. She didn't see why they would keep her. She did not feel bad. It was just that the lights were so bright and she could not hear the voice too well. She wished that she were not there on the table. It was very uncomfortable and she felt so helpless with only the hand and the voice. She wondered where they had taken her coat. It was a new coat and it was pretty and her mother would be angry when she saw the rusty spots on the brown front.

She had not finished thinking about how angry her mother would be when there were more people in the room. She did not know who they were until the nurse came back. The nurse

was bending over the table, talking to the girl that was lying there.

"Your parents are here, Bobby." The others were there too, standing beside the table.

"Hello, Mrs. Johnson. She's going to be all right." That was the voice. It was good to hear it again so clearly. It was talking about the girl on the table.

"Of course she will, Jane." Jane was her name. The woman was talking to her. Who was she talking about? She felt herself let go of the hand and she was afraid because she felt so alone. It was all strange to her now. The others looked so far away as if they had moved across the room and the light was no longer shining in her eyes. But the walls were green. They were talking to the girl on the table but she was too far away to hear them. The voice that she knew was silent. The nurse turned from the group around the table and came toward her. She had to come a long way to get to her and she looked different. Now it seemed as if they were standing side by side. She wasn't upside down any more.

"How do you feel? We haven't paid much attention to you. You don't look so good." The nurse was talking to her, Jane, now, and they were standing side by side in the room with the green walls.

"I'm all right. It's just that I don't know where I belong."

"There are some chairs out in the hall. Why don't you sit out there until the doctor is ready to see you?"

She knew that that was not what she meant, but she went outside to the hall and sat down in one of the big chairs. She tried to sit up very straight but her head sank into her hands because she felt very tired and she was still not sure that she belonged there.

JARRAD DENHARD:

'Green Was The Color'

She looked down from the bank that was like a cliff to the water lapping kittenishly along the foot of the bank where the beach should have been. There was none. There was the water and the cliff and the little house that should have been on the beach but wasn't, because there wasn't any beach, and so it was leaning on the cliff with its pile feet in the water. And there was the sun and the motorboat sound and the gurgle of a wet child's laughter.

The house was sitting smally below her trying to hide its lack of paint by losing itself in the brush on the cliff, but she laughed at it. She put down her suitcase and leaned on the stair rail and she laughed at it. Then she couldn't wait any longer and she started down the side of the cliff. The steps were very steep and her legs were very long. She stopped at the first foothold that could hardly be dignified as a landing and thought that it was going to be too much after all. She was getting old and stiff and her breath was already short and she just couldn't make this trip down again much less get up to try. But there was the house, her house. The first place that had ever really belonged to her. It was tiny and old and unpainted and generally uninhabitable but it was home.

"You are a mess. But you are mine and that suits me." She went down the rest of the steps deciding that she had better name her house *Suits Me*, because it did, and then again, it was the unanswerable answer to the slighting comments of her more worldly friends. She reached the doorway and leaned against it for a moment caught between the house and the cliffside. She smiled because it was so quiet and she felt so safe there. Then she laughed aloud, because she liked the feeling so well. The door opened easily at her touch and she was there.

"This will be my sitting room," she thought, "and that will be my bedroom. I wonder if a bed will fit in there." She looked out of the sitting room window and discovered the dock below. "So much for this floor." There were steps leading down the

bank-side of the house—straight down with a turn at the bottom so that she could close her eyes at the landing and discover the room all over again. She felt as the wet child must have felt, but alone. She wished for someone to share this house with her. The rippled sun splashed the walls of the room and she called it her own, but that was not enough. Now she must give it to someone. Then it would be truly hers. Across the room was the door leading out onto the dock. There were no transitions in her house. You were inside or out, up or down, but never in between. She liked that.

The dock was warm in the tired sun with just a hint of dampness creeping back to announce the night. She folded herself wearily onto the doorsill and lit a cigarette with practiced efficiency. Her eyes followed the match down into the water and caught there the image of a face. It was not hers so it was all right to speak to it.

"Hello, how's the water? Come up and visit awhile?" The small boy did not answer but hauled himself up to drip carefully on the edge of the dock away from her. He did not look at her at once and she was grateful simply for his presence. To her unpracticed eye, he looked much like the general run of small boys; too thin, too bent with the self-consciousness of suddenly having too many bones, a little cleaner than most—but then he was wet and shiny in the sun and it was hard to tell. His hair was drying into a rough brownness that would be unkempt in a moment. A breeze ricocheted off of the bank behind her and the boy shivered. She told him to go in and get her raincoat to wrap up in. He was not very talkative and certainly not very handsome, but he was her first guest and she must treasure him.

The boy stood up and walked carefully on the far side of the dock watching the boards so that he would not stomp his toes. He did not look at her until he had reached the doorway and then he thought, she is old. He stumped his toe on the doorsill and blushed and went into the house. It still looked the same as it had when old Mr. Ben had kept his boats in it. He did not see how anyone could live in it but then she was one of the summer people. The room certainly was a mess. It was meant

to have a boat in it and there was not a boat, and so it should not have been a mess. He looked in several paper cartons that might have held a coat and found books and records and a record machine and light bulbs and baked beans and even sheets and blankets. The blankets were soft and scratchy and his tingling flesh could almost feel it around him, but she had said a raincoat and he could not find the raincoat. He went back to the doorway.

"I can't find the raincoat." He had looked in the paper cartons that were hers and so now he could look at her when he said it. She was still sitting on the doorsill. She had to look up to see him. That was better.

"Look on the stair rail." She stood up and stretched and she was very big. He went back into the room and found the coat. It was the color of wet sand, but it was not wet and it did not scratch and he put it on. Then he could not see his long legs and the fingernail that he had chewed off yesterday when his mother had yelled at him and he felt warm. The dock was cold when he went outside. She had moved to the end and she did not see him. But he could see her. She was not fat and slouchy like his mother, just big like a man is big and her hair was short, too. He could not remember how long his mother's hair was. It really did not matter. He walked up beside her.

"I'm warm now, thank you."

She turned and saw that the fingernail and the legs were hidden and she smiled at him. She could feel the width and the warmth of the smile as it spread across her face and she wondered who this little boy was.

"Who are you, I mean what's your name?"

"Peter." He looked with a frown at the place on the coat where the third button should have been. It was not there. His eyes shifted to the dock.

"Is that all?" she laughed.

"Yes."

"No last name?"

Her voice was gruff and like the doctor's voice when he spoke to his mother. It wasn't that he didn't like the doctor. He was not very patient but he was nice.

"Yes."

She saw that she had frightened him and she was angry. She could talk to a busy saleswoman or an important customer, but she could not talk to this child. She reached out and turned the coat collar up around his ears and then reached for another cigarette.

"It's Johnston." And he smiled.

She thought it was a wonderful smile, all crooked and shy and satisfied.

"I'm Caroline Thompson, but call me Tommy."

"Why?"

"Because Caroline doesn't fit me and Tommy is shorter."

He did not remark about this and she turned to see what he was thinking. He was looking at the curve of his toes around the splintered edge of the dock.

"Tommy's easy enough to say, isn't it?"

"But are you a Miss or a Mrs.?"

"Neither to you. Don't worry about it. Just Tommy."

"Why are you living in Mr. Ben's boathouse?"

"Because I like it here. There's water and sand and not too many people and mostly because it's mine now. I've never—" There was no reason for Peter to move closer to her, unless maybe it was because the sun was going away and the water was making lonely sucking sounds at the foot of the piles.

"I like your coat," he said.

And in the shadow she could blush and ruffle his hair without seeing herself acting like a fool over a scrawny little boy who turned blue when the sun went down.

"You'd better wear it home. You can't swim back now. It's too cool."

"I'll walk and I won't need it. I'm warm now." He began to unbutton the coat with reluctant fingers.

"Where do you live?" Peter moved away from her then and a breeze came up out of the water and was cold on the arm where he had been.

"Around there." He did not point and she did not ask where. She wanted very much to know but she would not ask any more.

"I thought maybe I could drive you around."

"No."

The sun was gone and they stumbled on the embarrassed doorsill as they went into the house. Tommy went into the little kitchen and found the oil lamp that Mr. Ben had left in the house for her. She had thought that she knew how to work it but she turned the wick too low and could not get it to burn and she cursed and lit a candle instead. She saw Peter in the doorway watching her. She said that she was sorry, she shouldn't have cursed.

"That's all right. Mother does it all the time. The same way only longer."

Tommy looked under the sink to find a holder for the candle and left the kitchen which was really too small for conversation. She would remember that. Some rooms in her house were too small.

They went up the steps single file to the door and the bridge that led to the bank steps. Peter went first, quickly, conquering each step with unknowing ease while Tommy counted the stairs half to herself so that she would know the worst of her trip. Her suitcase stood at the top by the rail and she was glad that it was there. Her hands would feel empty.

"Can you find your way?"

"Yes."

"Hadh't I better go part of the way with you?"

"No."

"Well, be careful." She turned abruptly and fumbled at the handle of her suitcase.

"I'll be back," he said. Tommy straightened into the warm darkness and the suitcase was not heavy.

"Good. I'm glad!" And she started down the steps to her house.

She began the long process of unpacking, going from one room to another, finding sheets and blankets and light bulbs. Then she remembered that her bed was not there and she did not need the sheets after all. She put them back in the box and took the blanket with her to the floor below. The door to the dock stood open and there were night sounds in the room. She pushed the old chaise close to the window that was open over the water and knelt framed by the blackness while she lit a cigarette with tired hands. The match floated slowly down to the water, still glowing, until it was reflected briefly and then was gone. Tommy curled her length into the hollows of the knobby mattress and waited for the darkness and the sound of the water to cover her, but the red glow of the cigarette held her attention. It was a note out of tune, out of the cool damp stillness in the room. She thought of Peter. She dragged deep on the cigarette and threw it out the window down into the dark and the wet where it made a last splutter of helplessness and died. Then it was quiet and she slept.

Tommy drove along the highway with a feeling of urgency. It had been a long day, starting with sun-up and cramped bones and hating to leave for town. She might as well not have gone. She had felt out of context in the world that should have been her own. The lights of the long open corridors filled with racks of dresses, and coats, and gowns that were advertised as fluffy, were cold and lent no color.

The light was red and the sun was gold and windshields flashed their jeers because she was still. The day had been a busy rushing clamoring stillness, all day of it. The light was green.

She supposed they had not understood her today. The girls in her department had laughed at her stiffness and she had pointed out a customer who wanted to be waited on. They had not laughed at her anymore. And Mr. Pierce had called her on the carpet for that shipment of blouses that had not sold and she had not been sufficiently sorry. She was only sorry

that she was there. She had eaten alone in her office. The others sat at their table and wondered why she always ate alone in her office. She did not really like lunch and she was busy and it did not really matter.

The turn-off was coming. A filling station. It belonged to Mr. Green and it was painted white with green trim. She would paint the floors of her house green because she liked green. She had to go to New York next week. She would paint when she came back. Tonight she would unpack and set up the kitchen and make the bed that must be there by now, and she wondered whether Peter would be there. She would have to find a place for the record machine. Downstairs she thought, where the water can hear it at night.

She laughed at the child in her and turned on the radio. The dresses on sale tomorrow would sell. The ad was good and the price was right and Mr. Pierce to the contrary, she had not been in the business twenty years for nothing.

She wondered if Peter would be there when she got home.

Peter wondered if she would be there now. He would go down the steps and open the door and she would be there. He went down the steps and opened the door and she was not there. He wondered where she had gone. He went in and there was a bed that had not been there and the room was a mess too. He wanted this house to be neat. He wanted to sweep the floor but there was no broom. He could put things away. He did that at home, but here there was no place to put things yet. He remembered the sheets downstairs and ran to collect them and the blanket and the spread and ran up to the room where the bed was and dropped them onto it. He stopped to catch his breath. He had been running when he had left the house, only his mother had stopped him and asked him where he was going. She did not want him to go because she thought the new woman would take advantage of him. He mustn't do any work for her unless he got paid. She would have stopped him but she was not dressed and he was gone. All of them were inside and she was all right so she could take care of them now. Peter tried to remember whether the baby had been fed supper. He was supposed to have fed her supper and he had not. He supposed that his mother would do it if the baby cried. He began to make up the bed. He did not think that Tommy would mind. He was glad that the woman in the blue uniform had taught him to make hospital corners. The doctor had said that she was a public nurse. He did not know what that was, but she had taught him how to make a neat bed.

It was finished and it looked good to him. He was glad that he had thought of it. He went around the room straightening the boxes, occasionally looking in to see what they held, occasionally looking back at the bed and being proud of it from all angles. He found an old rag in the corner and began to polish the window in the room, the lowest pane first because he could not reach the top one. The rag was very dirty and the window was very dirty and he was tired when he heard her footstep on the bridge. He put down the rag and ran to give the bed a final pat before the door opened.

The door was stuck and Tommy swung her hip against it. It was almost as if there were something inside that didn't want to let her in. She dismissed the thought as the door gave and she lost her balance into the tumbled room. She saw the bed and Peter and then today was gone. It was yesterday and she laughed.

"Hello there. You did come. Here, help me with these, will you?" Peter moved to take some of the packages out of her arms, feeling each one carefully as he put it down.

"You look different," he said. She had on city clothes. He had not known that she was going to the city today. He wondered why she did not stay here all the time if she liked it so well.

"These are my working clothes. I don't like them very much." Peter did not like them either. They made him feel small and cold and dirty and like he didn't belong here any more. She hadn't said anything about the bed yet.

"Why don't you take these things downstairs while I change into my stay-at-home clothes?"

"Can't I stay here?"

"No, of course not."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going to change my clothes."

"My mother doesn't mind if I stay with her while she's dressing."

"Well, I'm not your mother. Now downstairs with you. And be careful with that brown bag. It's breakable." She started out the door to get her suitcase.

"What's in it?" He was clutching the bag tightly because he hurt all over and the hurt in his hand made it feel better.

"Whiskey. I'm going to have a drink before I fix supper."

Peter clutched the bag even tighter then and she came back into the room in time to see him screw up his mouth at the feel of it.

"You don't have to be that careful," she laughed. "It's not that important."

He put one foot very carefully after another as he went down the steps because he was trying to think. He knew that if he thought hard enough the hurt would go away. It was just that everything was different. It was different about staying upstairs because she was not his mother so maybe the whiskey would be different too. He was sure of it. She had said that it was not important. But she had not noticed the bed. He was hungry when he reached the bottom step. He went into the kitchen and began to unwrap the packages to see what they were having for dinner. He did not unwrap the brown package.

Tommy stood at the door and watched him go down the steps with almost a sense of loss. She shook her head and picked up the suitcase with heavy arms. Something was wrong but she did not know what. She supposed it did not really matter. She threw the suitcase up on the bed with a conscious effort. She was glad that the bed had come. She could sleep comfortably tonight and be of some use at work tomorrow. She opened the suitcase swiftly and began to unpack. It was not until her eye caught the contrast of her yellow shirt against the green of the spread that Tommy noticed that the bed had been made. For a moment she could push the thought out of her mind. Of course the bed was made, wasn't her bed always made? And then the thought of Peter washed up from the stairs that he had descended so slowly and she was ashamed.

She dressed as quickly as her racing thoughts would permit. While she slipped into the slacks and shirt that she had worn the day before, all the things that had gone wrong clicked into place, her mood, the bed, the whiskey—for some reason the whiskey, and then they were all jumbled together again, as twisted and confused as the pile of clothes she had thrown on the floor because it had not mattered. And the thought made her pick up the clothes and arrange them with gentle hands on the bed because suddenly and with frightening strength it mattered very much.

She went downstairs pausing at the landing to light a cigarette and search the room for the reassurance of Peter's presence. He was in the kitchen. She could see him sitting on the high wooden stool staring without motion at the neat stack of food before him. He was hungry and it was getting dark. He found the lantern and a match and some of the shadows went away. He saw her on the landing and wished that she were not in the dark. It was lonely in the dark.

"I'm hungry. Are we going to have hamburgers for supper?"

She came into the kitchen and turned up the light. "I guess you are hungry. It's late. I'll skip my drink and we'll get to work on this. I hope you can cook as well as you can make a bed. I'm not good at either one."

Peter laughed then. "I'll bet you're just kidding me. I can make a bed good because I do it a lot at home. I don't cook much. Just when Mother can't."

"Your mother sick?" She handed him the can opener and the baked beans. He turned away from the light to rest the can on the sink.

"Sort of, sometimes," he said.

"She doesn't mind you staying over here late like this, does she?"

"She doesn't care." He didn't mean to lie. And she really didn't care. She didn't worry about it anyway. She just got mad about it sometimes, like today.

"It's turning cool. The breeze has come up. It was hot in town today." Always talk about the weather, she thought. She wondered if that applied to the case. She could not talk about clothes or whiskey or families. What was there left. And she was surprised at the number of things that there were left to talk about.

"Do you like music, Peter?" He did not know. They would find out tonight. They would play some of her favorite music while they ate.

Peter took the tablecloth and the silver into the other room to set the table while she put the hamburgers on to cook. While they called back and forth about where the card table and napkins and the record player were, he wondered why cooking dinner at home was not this much fun. Maybe because he was so hungry and the food smelled so good. He went to the dock door and opened it. The sun was almost gone and it made the water a bloody color and it frightened him, but he liked it.

"Tommy, come look." He ran halfway across the room.

"What's the matter?"

"The sun. The sun. It's . . ." He looked back at the doorway. "Come look."

She came and stood beside him at the door and watched the blood drain out of the bay, leaving a cool death.

"I like it too," she said, and then it was time to eat.

After they had eaten they went out on the dock. The music and the licking of the water were one sound and they did not talk because of it. Peter lay on his back and felt the ridges where the boards were and where the boards weren't and watched the small red light of Tommy's cigarette as it shifted out and away and back again to the boat post where she was leaning. The light and the music and the quiet gave him a funny feeling, lonely sort of, but he did not want to talk. The record ended and Tommy shifted easily to her feet. "I am going to paint the floor green," she said.

He got up and followed her into the house. "When do we start?"

"Next week, when I get back."

"You're going away again."

"Business."

"Tomorrow?"

"No. Saturday." New York is a wonderful place, she told herself. You like it there. Lots of people. Night life. Gay crowds.

"Business," he said.

They cleared the table and stacked the dishes in the sink. Peter washed and Tommy dried.

"You need some place to put them."

"Can you reach this shelf?"

They measured Peter beside the cabinet and the dishes were put away. The next job was the big room with all the furniture and all the boxes that had to be unpacked and Tommy did not think she could do it tonight.

"Now," he said. When they were through it was not just a room any more. It was theirs and they each chose a chair and sat down to remember the laughter and the dust and the discovery of it all. Tommy was very tired and Peter yawned with his face turned away. But she saw it.

"You've got to go home and go to bed."

"It's too early to go back. Can't I stay a while longer?"

"No. I'm going to sweep and go to bed myself unless you want to do it tomorrow when you come."

"Okay." He put on his jacket and took a long time to find the zipper. "Can I play the record?"

"Sure. You know how to work it now. Go on. You need your sleep. You've got a lot of growing to do yet." She put a hand on his shoulder to give him a little push toward the stairs, but the push did not come.

"Well. Goodnight."

"Goodnight. You'll be here tomorrow night." It was not a question. She did not exactly know what it was.

"Yes, Ma'm." He went upstairs, wondering why he had not called her Tommy. He had called her Tommy before. He turned on the light so that he could see the bank steps. They were very steep and very long and he was tired. He turned and put his foot back on the top step.

"Goodnight, Tommy." And he shut the door behind him.

Tommy looked at the tired smile in the mirror in front of her when she heard him call. She must be very tired. She had never seen her smile quite like that before. She turned out the bathroom light and walked in the dark to the patch of grayness that came in the door. I am glad I bought this house, she thought. It is what I have always wanted. There was something else too, but she shut the door and went upstairs to bed.

* * * * *

It was too cold to move down to the shore they had said. Her mother was worried about her catching cold and not eating right and being all alone down there. But the winter had been long and crowded and she did not mind being alone. The house was all green and tan and the summer had made it home to her. She and Peter had worked together to make it exactly what they had wanted it to be. It seemed strange now that there was someone else who wanted the same things that she did. Most of their letters to each other were about the house, about all the things that were left for them to do because the summer had been too short.

She hoped that he would be there tonight. She had written him that she was coming but she could not ask him to come.

It had been a long winter.

The drive was long too, and it no longer felt familiar to her. The road stretched its length bleakly in the cold gray afternoon and seemed by its very emptiness to challenge her. She had seen it before like this. In the middle of the winter she had gone down to the house for a week end because she had not had to work. Peter had not been there. He was in school in town. She had not gone again. It was too cold.

She began to look for all the familiar landmarks. The fish-house where she had gotten bait for the fishing trip when she had gotten so sunburned and Peter had to cook supper and it was good but she could not eat and he had understood—it was there but it was closed. The sign was faded and she drove faster because suddenly this drive depressed her.

She tried to remember Peter as she had seen him on the last night in the country but only the colors came through. The brownness of him against the green floor and the white quiet smile when he remembered to smile. It had been a strained evening, their goodbye sitting between them muffling into silence all the things they should have said. She had supposed that it was because Peter was too young that he did not talk much. There was no excuse for her. Only that it was too late. They did not have to talk that night to understand. They had both been miserable and they had both known it. Peter had left early with a promise to look after himself and the house and to write. She had not locked the house when she had left the next morning. What was left inside no one could take.

The turnoff surprised her and cut into her thoughts. It had come too soon. She turned the car sharply and kept her hands clenched on the steering wheel. The road held her attention then and it was all green and brown and white. She parked the car and began to unload her bags. She did not look toward the stairway. She wanted him to be there but she could not look for him.

Peter stood at the top of the stairs and watched the car pull to a stop on the road. He saw her get out of the car but she did not look toward him. He started to call out to her and then he didn't. There was no hurry. He had waited here all day yesterday too because he had not known just when she could come. He had started to wait in the house, but it was dark and lonely in the house now, it had been that way all winter. He had not gone there much in the winter. Just to see that everything was all right. He guessed he knew now why they called places like this summer homes. It was because they were only homes in the summer.

She was coming down from the road now and he could not wait any longer. He began to run calling her name over and over again until it did not sound like Tommy anymore, but it sounded right.

Tommy heard him call and put down the suitcase that she was carrying before she looked up. Then she started to run too, without thinking about how silly it was and then they were there on the cliff with their arms wrapped around each other, laughing and hugging each other.

"You've gotten so tall," she said.

"You should have come back sooner. All your suntan is gone." And he laughed again and buried his head in her coat. She laughed too, because no matter how cold it was, it was summer again.

They carried her things down the steps and into the house. It was stuffy inside and they went from room to room opening the shutters and the windows. Peter went downstairs first and Tommy dumped the last of her packages on the bed and began to throw on the old slacks and shirt that still hung in the corner. She had to hurry because there were so many things that had to be done before it was dark. Everything must be settled by dark so that they could relax after supper.

"Can I go out and look at the boat before supper?" Peter called up the stairwell. "I won't take long."

"Put on something warm. It's getting cold now. And bring in the lantern if it's out there."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Tommy smiled as she poked through the boxes to find their supper and remembered the boat that Peter had wanted and that she had been so convinced that she needed. They would have to scrape it and paint it early so that they could fish on the first good day. She wondered when Peter got out of school. They would have to make some special plan for that day. She picked up the food package and went downstairs.

The dock door was open and the room was cold, but it smelled fresh and briny. She saw that Peter had swept and dusted it so that they would not have to do it tonight. She looked in the corner for the record machine and set it up. She started to leaf through the records when Peter tumbled in the door, laughing and swinging the lantern and bubbling with the news of the boat's condition.

"It needs paint," he said.

"What color?"

"White with green trim."

"We'll have to scrape it, and that's a job. Do you want one hamburger or two?"

"Two. And I'll scrape. It's fun."

"We'll scrape together, my friend. Share and share alike." She ruffled his hair and went into the kitchen. Peter put his favorite record on the machine and turned it up loud so that he could hear it when he was in the kitchen. He had not heard it since last summer, but the tune had run through his head all winter long. He had never remembered a song that well before. He went in to help with supper. He was very hungry.

They ate supper on the little table in the room where the music was. The door was closed, but the wind had risen and it took the place of the water sounds. Peter thought that winter in this house would have been nice too. He did not mind the wind and the dark anymore.

"I won't be out of school for a month yet. I wish it was sooner."

"What do you want to do then?"

"Come over here. I've got a lot to do. The boat will have to be first, I guess."

"Won't you have a lot to do at home too?" He did not seem to mind her asking about home anymore. He did not say anything about it. He just didn't mind.

"Daddy will be home for a while. It's his vacation time."

Tommy got up and turned the record over. "Your father will want to see a lot of you, won't he? He doesn't get to see much of you when he's working."

"He'll be with mother all the time. He says she needs him." Sometimes he wondered why his mother needed his father around. He wasn't there much and he couldn't cook very well or make a hospital corner, but he was nice and Peter liked it when he was home.

"Would you want to come to town with me the day after you get out of school?" She turned in time to see the light come into his eyes before his nod shook it out.

"Yes," he said. He had not been to town for a long time just for fun. His father had taken him to the dentist once last year, but they had not stayed because his mother was waiting for them to come home. And he wanted to see the store where Tommy worked. He knew all about her work and he wanted to see the warehouse and the trucks and the people that she talked about.

"There won't be much to do and you'll have to entertain yourself for a while, but we'll have lunch together and I'll take the afternoon off so we can go to the movies if you want to."

Peter felt the excitement ripple through him and he jumped up from the floor. "Let's go soon," he said.

"The day that you get out of school," she said. She was glad that she had not been sitting down. The idea made her restless too. They would be surprised when she took Peter in to meet them. They did not know about him.

"I'll have to write a note to your mother and ask if you can go."

Peter looked around the room for his sweater. It was cold and he would shiver in a minute and he did not want Tommy to think that he was afraid that his mother would not let him go. She would not care. She just never went because she did not feel like it. He did not mind anymore because he would rather go to the store with Tommy.

"We'd better ask if you can spend the night over here that night so we can start early. Can't be late for work."

"Okay. She'll let me."

Tommy found the record that she wanted and held it up.

"This?" she asked.

"Un-hunh."

They listened to the sound of the quiet music and the sound of the wind that was like the water and they did not want to talk. The smoke that curled up from Tommy's cigarette drew the corners of the room in close and Peter was glad that the floor was green because he could pretend that it was grass and grass grew in the summer. It was almost summer now. He never felt this way except in the summer.

"Time for you to go home."

"Are you going to be here tomorrow?"

"I'll be here 'til Sunday night."

"Can I come by tomorrow after school?"

"You don't have to ask anymore. Just come. We've got lots of planning to do for our day in town."

"The house needs cleaning too."

"Slavedriver." She laughed and put her arm around his shoulders to walk him to the steps.

"Goodnight." He leaned for a minute against her and then went up the steps without looking back. It was a long walk to his house and it was cold and he would have to hurry.

Tommy went into the kitchen and stacked the dishes that they had left because it was a special occasion. Then she put

on her jacket and went out on the dock. It was strangely quiet on the water tonight. There were no water sounds and the crickets had not started yet. She did not like it alone here at this time of year. It was too cold to stay long and she went inside where the light was.

* * * * *

Tommy got no answer from the note that she had written to Mrs. Johnston. She had not really expected any. She wondered if Peter's mother was as bad as the people around here had told her. Or maybe she didn't care. Anyway, Peter came. He had just appeared with his toothbrush in his hand. He said that he could stay the night.

"We're still going tomorrow, aren't we?"

"Sure. Put your toothbrush in the bathroom. You can sleep down here if you like."

Peter had never slept in a room with a green floor before, or in a bed that was over the water. He wondered if it would rock like a boat. But Tommy would have told him if it did. After she left him he waited until it was quiet upstairs and then he opened the dock door softly. He would sit awhile and watch the water. That's what Tommy did when she was here alone. She had told him about the cricket sounds and the fireflies and the way the water sound was different when you were alone. He watched the fireflies and played catch with them. He closed his eyes very hard and then opened them in time to see the next blink. Sometimes he missed and he was getting sleepy and his eyes would not open fast enough and there weren't enough fireflies anyway. He thought about tomorrow and went to bed.

Tommy did not talk much to him as they drove into town, but he did not mind. She drove fast and he liked that. He would just catch a glimpse at something or someplace he liked and then it would be gone, but there was always something better coming toward them. Sometimes he pointed things out to Tommy, and she said yes she knew and somehow he knew that she did, so it did not matter that she didn't have time to look.

"Have you got the list?"

"I haven't got to get much." His mother had not wanted anything. She had sounded funny when she had said that she didn't want him to get her anything. He guessed he wouldn't. He knew what he was going to get for Tommy though. But it was a secret and he must not think about it or he would say it out loud.

"I've got some shopping that you can do for me. Do you think that you can get around all right? I'll be a little busy this morning."

"I can ask somebody."

She parked the car and they walked through the alley to the store. He had never seen a store so empty. It was quiet, a busy kind of quiet with people saying good morning with serious faces and looking at papers and sometimes laughing, but not out loud. They went up to the second floor. This was Tommy's floor. He wanted to know every corner of it, but he didn't have time to ask her about what things were before the others were there.

"Hi, boss. Is this it?" That must be Mary Jane. She was blond and pretty. Tommy had told him about her and about the little French girl.

"This is Peter, girls. Peter, this is the crew. They don't work hard and they're not very smart, but they are fairly nice people."

They all laughed and Peter did not feel shy anymore. Maybe it was because he was wearing his blue suit. He always felt good in his blue suit. And besides these were Tommy's friends and he was not shy with her.

Peter did not know who the man was who came up to them then. He started talking to Tommy, only he called her Miss Thompson and he had a funny smile. Peter did not like him.

"And who is this little man? I didn't know you had a son, Miss Thompson." Tommy smiled but it was a funny smile too.

"You know I'm not married, Mr. Judson. Isn't that someone over there who wants you?"

"Oh, then it's not your son."

"No, Peter isn't my son." Peter wished that she had said something else. What he was, not just what he wasn't. She didn't look at him when she introduced him to someone else. He did not hear the name. He only heard her say, "My friend Peter." And that didn't sound right either. It was cold on the second floor. It must be the air conditioning that Tommy had told him about. It was not warm like it was outside.

"Well, here's my list and some money. The market is the place we passed on the way down. Get what you want for supper." She had to get to work. She really should have had better sense than to bring him to town on one of her busy days. She would have to make time to do something with him this afternoon. She hoped that he would be all right. This should be a holiday for him. She wanted to ruffle his hair and tell him that she would have more time for him later, but she couldn't do that. She had said that he was not her son. She could not remember ever having said that before. She told one of the girls to show him how to get out of the store and went back to her office. She wished that Mr. Judson would turn on the lights earlier in this place. It was too dark. That was his job anyway.

Peter felt very important shopping for Tommy and the house in the market. He had shopped for his mother plenty of times but that was over the phone. This way made him feel like they belonged to him. Like it was his house too. He got cold cuts for supper because Tommy had made potato salad. He got salami too. He did not like salami, but she did, and he could eat the cheese.

It took him a long time to find the present for Tommy. There were so many scarves and so many stores, but he knew that he would know when he saw it. It was almost lunchtime when he found it. It was green, the color of the floor and the there were white and tan things in it. He did not know what they were but they were the right color and the scarf was soft and slippery. He felt it a long time before he bought it, just to make sure. Then he was late and he had to run back to the store.

Tommy was putting on her hat when he went into the office. He giggled a little because he had never seen her in a hat before.

"Well, you just made it. You get everything you wanted?"

"Everything," he said. And he could not help smiling and then he made himself stop because it was still a secret.

"Good. Let's go."

"Where are we going to eat?"

"Upstairs in the restaurant. At the buyer's table. They are all women and they all want to meet you. Don't be shy. They just sound like they bite." She wished that she hadn't said that. He would think that she was nervous about taking him up there. As if she wasn't proud of him. It wasn't that. She didn't know what it was. Everything would be all right. She was just tired.

They were all there when they got upstairs. Peter stood on one foot as he was introduced halfway around the table, and then he shifted because that foot was tired. They sat down and the others started to ask him questions. Like how old he was and what grade he was in at school and where did he live and all those things. He was glad that Tommy had told him that they did not bite.

"Tommy, he's the spittin' image of you. Where on earth did you find him?"

"He found me." She looked at the menu but she wasn't very hungry. Just a sandwich.

"You mean he isn't your son." She had forgotten that they knew so little about her. They all laughed. They knew that much anyway.

"Do I look like a mother?"

They laughed again and it was too loud. They were saying no. There was too much noise at the table and Peter knew that she would not hear him even if he was saying yes.

Tommy asked him what he wanted to eat. He was not hungry anymore.

After lunch they went to the movies. It was Peter's favorite comic team and he laughed a lot when he thought about it. Tommy did not laugh much. She had said that she liked Abbott and Costello too, but he guessed she didn't after all. He was glad when the movie was over. He was tired of sitting. It was sort of like sitting alone in the dark only he didn't like to do that here. It wasn't the same as at the house.

He told her what he had gotten for supper and she said that was all right. He was worried. Maybe she didn't like salami anymore.

"And I've got a surprise for you too."

"That's nice. What is it?"

"After supper."

"All right."

He wished that she had asked him about it some more. It was not as much fun to have a secret when nobody wanted to know it. They didn't talk anymore on the way home. When Peter got out of the car he looked down at his suit to make sure that he had not spilled anything on it. There was nothing there. He had thought maybe that was what was wrong, but there was nothing there.

"Did you make your bed this morning?"

"Un-unh."

"Well, you do that and I'm going to fix a drink."

"Aren't you going to change your clothes?"

"No. I guess not."

Peter took off his coat and straightened the room and then went in to help with supper. Tommy hadn't started yet. She was just sitting on the little stool with a glass in her hand staring at it. He started to leave. There was something he had forgotten upstairs.

"You hungry?"

"Some."

"Let's eat." She was in a hurry then. She must want to know what the surprise is after all.

He had been right about the salami. She did not eat any.

"Do you want to put on some music?" It was the right time. It was getting dark and cool and he wanted to have the music playing when he gave her the scarf. All of the best times had music.

"If you want to."

He put on his favorite record. The one that sounded like the water.

"Are you ready for your surprise?"

"What is this great surprise, anyhow?"

"You'll see. Wait a minute." He ran up the stairs and got the scarf out of his pocket. He wished that he had gotten it wrapped up with a bow, but there hadn't been time. He looked at it slowly before he folded it again. She would like it. She would have to like it. It was green. He ran down the steps too, and did not stop running until he had put it in her hands.

"Here it is."

She unfolded the scarf and saw the green and the white and

the tan and then they were all one color.

"It's lovely, Peter. Your mother will like it, I know."

He thought, I do not understand. This had been a long day and I have done a lot of things and I do not understand. But he did. She did not like the scarf. She thought he had bought it for his mother.

"But it's not for my mother. It's for you. See? The color. It's green. I thought green was your favorite color."

I've hurt him, she thought. I didn't ever want to hurt him and I have. It will never be right again after today.

"I'm sorry, Peter. I didn't understand. Thank you, and you were right. Green is my favorite color. What did you get for your mother?"

"Nothing." She said she didn't want anything, so I didn't get her anything."

"You shouldn't have gotten something for me and not for your mother."

"Why? You're different. I wanted to get you the scarf. I wanted to." He did not want to cry. She thought he was a grown up boy and he could not cry.

"She's your mother, Peter. It's because she's your mother."

"But how about you?"

Tommy put the scarf very carefully in his hand. She did not want to look at it anymore. It was green.

"I'm not your mother."

He took the scarf. Not because he wanted to, but if that was what she wanted, he would take it back. She wanted him to give it to his mother, but he could not. His mother did not like green.

Tommy watched him put the scarf into his pocket and felt bare and cold as if she should be wearing it in this room. She should be able to explain to him. She should tell him that she did not want him to give it to his mother, but she could not. Because she was not his mother.

"I'd better go now. She'll be waiting to see if I'm home."

"All right."

"I had a nice time. Thank you for taking me."

"You're welcome, Peter. I enjoyed it."

The record was finished and it made a rough sound over and over until he turned it off.

"I won't be here tomorrow. I have to stay in town for supper."

"All right." He guessed it was all right. He didn't know. He did not understand, but it was all right. He went upstairs and said goodnight from there. She had not moved from the center of the floor and she did not answer him. She probably hadn't heard. He wondered where he should put the scarf. His mother didn't like green.

Tommy heard the call and the slam of the door and did not move. She wanted a cigarette but the pack was upstairs. She went out on the dock and stood by the boat post. It was getting cold. She should get a sweater. But she did not move. It did not matter really.

CHARLES RUSSELL:

Jimmie's Visit

Except for one month out of each year when she brought him down to visit his father, except for the month beginning today, she had Jimmie to herself.

She looked across the lobby of the hotel, past the leaves of the row of palms, to the round face of the clock above the desk. The minute hand leaped forward. She turned and began to straighten Jimmie's collar. It had got rumpled and dirty from the train.

"Did we pack my army tank?" he asked.

"No, darling, we didn't. It was too big. We left it on your shelf."

"Will my dad bring me a present?" he asked. "When will he come?"

She glanced at the clock. "In a few minutes," she said. "We are early."

In her bag she could see James' letter with the large slanting handwriting running across it. He'd been married again in January. That was five months ago now.

Not that she minded his marrying again. Not that she cared one way or the other, except that she could not keep from feeling that a door had been shut in front of her; and with it, a part of her life had been closed off beyond reach.

"Will he bring me a present?" Jimmie was asking again.

She took a stick of gum out of her bag and gave it to him. "Perhaps, darling," she said. "But you won't ask him, will you? You'll wait and see."

A present, she thought. Yes, he was bringing a present. You might call it that. A kind of present, anyway—something for them both to see.

"I thought you might like to meet Betty," the letter in her

bag said, "since, during the month Jimmie's with us, he'll be spending a good deal of time with her. We could have lunch together. I've told her we're a pretty sane and civilized divorced pair. But if you think it would make it embarrassing, I'll meet you alone."

"Do bring your wife," she had written him. "I'd like to meet her, and I think it would make it easier for Jimmie to have me there just at first."

She shut her bag and looked up. Instantly she saw James. He was halfway across the lobby, and she saw him catch sight of her and smile and motion to the girl who was standing beside him.

"Hello, Joan," he said. "Not late, are we?"

She held out her hand. His fingers closed about hers in an impersonal gesture.

"And here's Betty," he went on, before Joan had time to speak. "Mrs. Andrews, Mrs. Andrews. Or how shall I put it? Betty's rehearsed me, but I've been worrying anyway."

"I didn't," said Betty. "He's making it up. I only told him not to bother about it." She spoke quickly, her words rushing into each other. She was not wearing gloves, and Joan could feel the warmth of her flesh as they shook hands.

For the first time, she was looking directly at Betty. Standing there, smiling a little, she was surprised to feel a faint tightening in her stomach, a sensation not of fear, but a feeling she could not recognize. If she had imagined at all what Betty would look like, she had not believed she would be so young. For she was younger than Joan and years younger than James.

Joan, turning to James, saw that he had his arm around Jimmie's shoulders.

"And here's Jimmie, Betty," he said. "This is the guy I've been telling you about."

Betty leaned down until her head was on a level with Jimmie's. She held her hands between her knees and her blond hair fell forward over her cheeks.

"Hello, Jimmie," she said.

"Hello," said Jimmie.

"We've been counting the days till you got here." She was smiling at him, and her voice sounded warm and gay. "Your room's all ready for you—wait till you see it. It's got a double-decker bed in it, and the little boy who lives next door wants to spend the night with you, but I told him he'd have to let you choose. Upper or lower?"

Jimmie looked over at his mother. He dug his finger into the buttonhole of his coat and spoke slowly, still looking at her. "Has it got a ladder?" he asked.

"A ladder," Betty told him, "and a board along the edge of the top bed, so you won't fall out when you turn over."

"I think I'd like the top bed."

"Good, and you know what else it's got? A picture of a boat painted right on the ceiling. The fellow in the top bunk can see the boat."

Watching him, Joan saw that he did not again turn to look at her. As Betty continued to speak to him, she watched his finger move once more about the buttonhole of his coat and grow still. And again she felt the tightening in her stomach.

"I'm sorry," she said to James. "I didn't hear what you asked."

"Nothing important. I just suggested lunch. Come on, you two; they won't hold the table."

Betty took Jimmie's hand. "We're ready," she said. "James, I hope we can have a table by the window."

"I've hidden her away in the country," he explained. "She doesn't see many people out there."

Joan laughed. Following with James, she kept her eyes on the back of Jimmie's head. In a minute he'll turn, she thought, just to make sure I'm here. She walked faster until she was just behind him.

"We had breakfast early," she said. "Jimmie's probably hungry . . . Aren't you, darling?"

He turned then and still holding Betty's hand, walked backwards. He was smiling. "We had breakfast on the train," he said. "We had pancakes."

When they finished ordering, she turned to Betty. "I'm anxious to hear about Four Oaks," she said. "Do you like it there?"

"We love it," she said. "I've never lived anyplace but right in town, and I couldn't believe we had almost five acres of land until I paced it off myself. James laughs at me whenever I say we're farmers, but we are."

"You don't mind if we make a farmer out of Jimmie, do you?" Betty said. "Just for a while? How would you like it, Jimmie? There aren't any cows, but we have a dog and I think we're going to have puppies while you're here. And we have baby chickens."

"At your house?" Jimmie asked.

"Yes. I pick them up when the hen's not watching and let them peck at my fingers."

"Could I pick one up?"

"You bet you can. I'll keep the old hen busy with corn. She never watches what's happening when she's eating. But let me tell you the best thing, the little boy next door has a pony, and he says you can ride him."

"Oh!" said Jimmie. His voice had risen. "I'd like that. I'd like to ride a pony. I had a chicken once. Did you know I had a chicken?"

He does like her, Joan thought suddenly. But she'd known he was going to. When Betty had first stooped down to speak to him, her blond hair falling around her cheek, she'd known it then. Once more the chill feeling crept up in her, forming slowly into fear.

"Jimmie loves animals," she said quickly. "He's forever bringing something home. Sometimes it makes the apartment a little crowded, but we manage." James, offering Joan the cream, asked about White Springs.

"What's the news?" he asked.

"I don't believe there is much news," she told him. "Things go along pretty much the same."

"How's your folks?"

"Mother and Dad are fine."

Have some cream, she thought, and tell me, because it's the civilized sort of thing to ask, about White Springs, about your mother and father. But why? You disliked White Springs; you hated my folks. You hated them almost as much as, toward the end, you hated me.

"I wrote you, didn't I," James said, "that my vacation comes up in the middle of the month? We thought we might take a trip down to the coast for a week or so. I'll let you know the address. Jimmie can send you some fancy post cards."

"You mean you're going to take me?" Jimmie asked.

"You bet we're going to take you. You're the reason we picked the coast."

"Because there are miles of beach," Betty told him, the excitement coming into her voice again, "and the best sand in the world. I used to go there when I was a little girl. That's where I learned to swim."

"I can almost swim now," he said. "I brought my suit. We didn't know if I'll need it."

"Of course you'll need it. We can swim anytime we like." She turned to Joan. "You won't worry about him, will you? I mean about his going in the water?"

Joan, seeing that he had spilled food on the tablecloth, took her napkin and wiped it up.

"Look, darling," her voice was low. "I think you had better eat your lunch. You haven't eaten very much."

She looked down at her own plate, at the food lying in it.

"Jimmie's like me," she said. "Neither of us eats very well away from home."

Betty, leaning a little across the table, smiled. "And Jimmie looks so like you too," she said. "More, really, than in the picture James has of him."

The conversation dwindled a bit after that, leaping up for a moment and then trailing off again. It was not until after they had finished dessert that Betty began to talk about things that children like.

"Let me tell you about the zoo."

James turned to Joan. "When Betty gets started on the zoo . . ."

"What kind of zoo?" Jimmie asked.

"Well, let's see," she said. "It's awfully big, to begin with, and every kind of animal you've ever heard of. And they're not in cages, either."

"But how do they stay in?"

"They're on one side of a wide trench and you're on the other. Wide enough to keep them from jumping, but not too wide to throw peanuts across."

"Tigers?" said Jimmie.

"Huge ones . . . And bears and apes and lions."

"Elephants?"

"Yes, and hundreds of monkeys. And an armadillo. Did you ever see an armadillo?"

He shook his head. Joan could see his eyes glitter. She stretched her napkin across her knees, ran her thumbnail down the edge. She thought, Already he thinks she is wonderful. I've got a double-decker bed and a beach that's the best beach you've ever seen. I've got a pony and a dog. I've got baby chickens you can pick up in your hands. I've got a zoo. How long is she going to keep it up? Sitting there amazing and delighting him with wonder after wonder.

Then, in panic, Joan realized that their dessert plates were empty, their coffee cups drained. James had already picked up the change the waiter had left, and pushed back his chair, and it was only Betty who was delaying the moment when they would leave the table and stand in the lobby saying good-bye.

"I'll tell you what," Betty said. "We'll go tomorrow and we'll see everything. Every single thing. Shall we?"

Jimmie wriggled out of his chair and stood up. "We might even go today," he suggested. "If we hurried, couldn't we go today?"

"That's a man of action." James looked at his watch. "I guess I better get you two started for home before you cook up any more plans."

They had risen now, all of them, and were winding their way out past the tables. Joan fumbled in her bag until she found the luggage check. When they reached the door, she handed it to James.

"I checked Jimmie's suitcase with the bellboy," she said. "While you're getting it, I'll take him with me and see what I can do about the food he's left on his chin." She turned to Betty. "We won't be long," she added.

She managed it rather well, she thought, as she took Jimmie's hand and started off down the corridor to the rest room. There had been nothing in her voice or her words to betray her. This was what she had been waiting for, this last moment when she could have Jimmie to herself again, believing that when she was alone with him, whatever it was that held her mind so stiff, so fearful, would release its hold.

He looked up at her and she could feel his hand tugging at hers. The walls of the corridor seemed to rush by her, pushing her along, hurrying her through these last few minutes, three . . . five at the most.

She dampened the end of a towel and, kneeling down beside him, she washed his chin and along the edge of his mouth.

"What's the matter, Mommy?" he said.

"Nothing's the matter, darling. Why!"

"You're not smiling."

She let the towel slip to the floor and put her arms around him, pressed her cheek against his. Her arms tightened around him and she drew in on her breath easing her throat until she could speak.

"Don't forget we have a zoo, Jimmie," she said. "You won't forget our zoo at home, will you?"

"How long is a month?" he asked.

He spoke slowly, his voice almost a whisper in her ear, and she knew that somehow, she had transmitted her fear to him.

"How long is it?" he asked again.

And immediately she was ashamed. In the mirror that ran along the wall she saw herself kneeling there between the wash basins, her arms locked tightly around him.

He was silent on the way back to the lobby, and when they joined Betty and James, he stood just in front of Joan, staring down at the toes of his shoes.

"Going back today, Joan?" James asked. "Or had you planned to stay over?"

"No, I'm going back," she said. "There's a train at three, but I think I'll wait and go tonight. I have some shopping."

"You mustn't worry about him," Betty said as she shook hands. "We'll take good care of him. The only real danger is that we may spoil him."

Jimmie pressed back against Joan's knees. "We've got a zoo at home," he said suddenly.

She felt the color rush up into her face as James glanced at her.

"I'll tell you know where to meet me when I come back," she said. Her voice was high, her words chattering a little. But they'd heard him. Of course, they'd heard him.

She saw the sharp glint of James' eyes, and his mouth, that looked as though far down inside, he might be laughing at her.

He picked up Jimmie's suitcase. "Well, fellow," he said. "all set?"

But Jimmie, turning around, burrowed his head in Joan's dress.

"You come," he said. "You come too."

"But, darling . . ."

There was a moment of silence while James stood there watching her, the ugly, mocking look no longer hidden. And then Betty bent down and put her hand on Jimmie's shoulder.

"Look, Jimmie," she said. "You know what I wish you'd do? I wish you'd come and help me buy some little fish for our pond. I don't know a thing about fish, and I think you'd probably pick out good ones."

His head turned around a little, but with his hand, he still kept a tight grip on Joan's dress.

"What kind of fish?" Jimmie said.

"Goldfish. Or we might get some speckled ones and a tadpole. We really should have a tadpole or two."

Joan could feel Jimmie hesitate. For a moment longer his hand dragged at her skirts, and then slowly, his fingers loosened. And why don't I say something? she thought. Why don't I say something to help, to make it easier for him? But in silence she watched Jimmie's head lift until he was looking at Betty.

As quickly as that, she had managed it. And they were leaving. She stood for a moment where they had left her, watching them disappear in the crowd.

She's pretty, she thought. She's really very pretty. And she'll be nice to Jimmie and keep him interested. Suppose she'd been the kind who didn't like children. That's something to be thankful for, isn't it?

Suddenly she imagined that she could see James there beside her.

"Afraid?" he asked.

"Why should I be afraid?" she whispered.

"I can think of a reason or two. Like to hear them?"

"No."

"Then listen, anyway. Afraid he'll have a good time. Afraid you can't keep the strings pulled tight enough."

"That's absurd. Look how he hated to leave me."

"Yes, he did, you almost had him sobbing. I'd forgotten about that and it's my guess he's forgotten too." He laughed. "But that must have been quite a scene in the washroom. Fast too. One of your best, and you're good at scenes. I ought to know."

"Stop it," Joan said. "Stop it! I won't listen."

A man coming toward her paused, glanced curiously in her direction. She walked away and walked straight through the vacant air where James stood.

Jimmie would be back in a month, she reminded herself. He'd have a nice visit and he'd come back, and it would be

over. They'd have the summer before them. Then they could go up to the lake.

When she reached the department store, she went into the ladies' lounge, sat down, and took her shopping list out of her bag. First on the list was material for slip covers.

She rose and walked over near the elevator to look at the store guide. She had meant only to make certain on what floor the materials were. And yet she stood there long after she found the materials and continued to stand there searching the different classifications until the print began to blur before her eyes. At last she turned and walked toward the operator.

"Where would I find fish?" she said. "The kind you buy for ponds."

RUTH P. RAE:

Man On The Hill

The morning mist hung thick over the lakes and the heavy tires of the bus sizzled over the wet tar road making the sound that frying bacon makes. The first thunder storm of the season had come the night before, and it had rained very hard. Now it was still drizzling.

Themí could hear the tires in her sleep, and they gradually woke her up. The bus smelled of the clinging scent of many sleeping people, and she could taste it thickly on her tongue. She looked out at the lakes and thought how she would like to be out there in a canoe with the damp mist and the drizzle on her face and arms and back. Something had been pressing on her mind all night, as a small piece of gravel stone in the shoe presses on the sole of the foot and will not be dislodged. She looked at the boy sitting beside her. He was still asleep, his sharp-featured face turned toward her. His short dark hair didn't stick up anymore, but was pressed down smooth around his temples where he had been sleeping on it. There was a fine dark stubble on his chin, and his lips were almost smiling.

Themí kept her eyes on him. It was the first time she had been able to study his face. Yesterday she had been sitting on the bus in the Spenserville station. She was going to visit friends, Meg, and her husband, Hugh. They owned a farm and she liked to visit them because they were happy and good and the farm was quiet and comfortable. But she dreaded the trip there. She dreaded bus stations and buses. When she was a child stray dogs followed her home, and she was afraid of dogs. Now it seemed that each time she rode a bus, some stray drunk or young squirt would sit beside her. And she feared them too, and she feared the time it took to get from Spenserville to the farm. She put her magazines on the seat beside her and hoped no one would sit there.

The boy got on the bus then, and he came over and asked if he could sit next to her. Themí took the magazines off the seat and he sat down. He asked her where she was going and then told her he was going to Wanerton, which was a city fifty miles beyond Clayton.

The bus left at three, and they read her magazines without talking much. Themí watched his hands as he turned over the pages of the magazine. They were clean and strong and blunt and honest-looking, and he wore a ring with a green stone in it on his right hand. His shirt cuffs were white against his tanned hands. At five o'clock the bus stopped and they ate greasy scrambled eggs and bacon together in a diner. He offered her a cigarette after they were through. "You know, I like the way you smoke. You look as if you were interested in the cigarette." That pleased Themí, and she asked him why he was going to Wanerton. He said he was going to look up a girl he knew there.

"It's really nothing serious." He pushed a small piece of bacon around the greasy blue plate. "It's just someone to sack up with." He was rolling up his shirt cuff as he sat across from her, and he kept his head down, only lifting his eyes when he looked at her. He snubbed up his cigarette, and it sizzled softly in the grease on the blue plate. They went back to the bus.

"Third floor," said the operator. "Aquariums, on your right."

She took her place in the elevator and waited for it to slowly begin to rise. When she reached the department, she saw at her first glance that it was empty. She shook her head at the approaching salesgirl, unable to speak.

Suddenly she turned and walked back to the elevator and in a moment she was down. She pushed past the operator and ran out of the store.

There was a taxi parked at the curb. She jerked at the door handle.

"Union Station," she said. "And hurry. My train's at three."

I can call him, she thought. Day after tomorrow, just to see how he is. If he needs anything from home.

The sky clouded over about seven that night and it had begun to rain. The bus was dark except for two reading lights. The woman across the aisle was asleep with her head on the arm of the seat. She was snoring.

"I slept with a girl that snored once, but only once. I hate women that snore." He was very talkative. He told her about the first time he had slept with a woman when he was fourteen. She was a married woman who worked for his uncle. Her husband was out of town, and one day he had gone there to give her some work his uncle was sending her, and she asked him to stay for dinner, and he stayed and he slept with her. He kept going back, and one day he went there and her husband was home and the husband had beaten him up and called him a dirty little punk and said his father would hear about it. He went home and his back ached and his nose hurt. He told his father before the husband could. And he cried when he told his father and his father had said, "You're an unlucky bastard," and that was all he had ever said about it.

The boy told Themí many things, and all the time he wouldn't look at her, even in the dark, but sat and played with his tie. Finally he fell asleep. Themí sat in the dark then, and the silence of the bus was very great, and she realized that she was sitting rigid and pressing her feet against the bar on the seat in front of her until her legs ached. She put her hands up to her face and her throat was tight. She wondered how people could dig into themselves and rip out their dirty little pasts and hand them to you like a dozen oranges. The thunder and the lightning started then, and the bus went slower and Themí didn't get to sleep until after the storm.

Now, as she looked at the boy with his flattened hair and his smiling lips, she wondered at how simple things were with him and the world, and with her—but that was now, right now, at the moment, and now is like a clean sheet of paper, and will soon be written on. And then is smudged, and written on, and scratched out and re-written, and cluttered. She looked at her watch. It was seven-thirty. They would be in Clayton in another hour.

The drizzle stopped and the sun started to break through the clouds, and Themí wished she could brush her teeth. The boy beside her began to move. The sun speared through the window and he blinked his eyes and sat up.

"Good morning," he said, and self-consciously tried to wipe the sleep away from his face. "It's really great—sleeping on a bus, I mean. Everyone looks so stupid. You look pretty good, though." His hair was sticking up straight on top where he had run his hand through it. He looked very young.

The bus was coming into Clayton. Meg and Hugh's farm was about thirty miles out of Clayton, and there was no way to get to it and they had no telephone. Themí was always afraid they hadn't gotten her letter and they wouldn't meet her and she would be stranded in the little store that served Clayton as a bus station. Clayton was a caught-between place. An airless place.

The boy got up. "I'll get your bag down for you. Say, listen, I—oh, forget it. I was lonely last night; I'm not now."

The bus slowed up and stopped in front of the little store. The boy picked up her bag and took it off the bus for her and

helped her down the steps. They stood there for a moment; he was looking at his shoes.

"I'm afraid I was pretty nasty last night—well—the reason I told you all that morbid stuff is—maybe it's because I like the way you smoke a cigarette." The bus driver yelled at him, and he got back on the bus and it pulled away and Themí stood there alone.

The store looked the same. A Miller's Highlife sign was in the window, and there were a lot of fly specks on the window too. Themí opened the screen door that was partitioned down the middle so that the white could go in on one side and the colored could go in on the other.

She went through the door and dragged her bag in after her. She laid it down by the news stand and went over to the counter. A woman about forty with loose, flabby skin was wiping the counter with a dirty rag. The front of her dress gaped where a safety pin replaced a button. Themí ordered a coke and a package of cheese nabs.

"That's not a very good breakfast, dear," the woman said, and didn't move to get the order. "We have some nice eggs—just came in this morning," the woman said and pulled a bottle of coke out of the ice box, wiping the wetness off with the dirty cloth. Themí thought of the eggs she had had for supper and she shuddered.

"No, thanks," she said, and went over to sit in the only booth in the store. There were no straws and she had to drink the coke out of the bottle the woman had wiped with her dirty cloth.

She thought of the boy on the bus, and the way people told her things like that because she was quiet. Quietness should envelope strength, but it never did, and people would never learn that it never did. It must be very tiring for mothers, she thought, for they have to be strong for people all the time, and they must be very weak for others keep giving them their weaknesses. I would make a good mother, she thought.

The door swung open, and a drunken farmer bumped against the partition and caromed into the room. He tried to focus his eyes, and squinted at her foolishly. Oh, God, she thought. Why don't they get here. She looked at her watch. It was quarter to nine. She looked down at her cheese crackers and she felt the drunk angling his way toward her.

"Hiya, Honey, whatcha doin'?" He leaned on the table with his hands, supporting himself. His hands were cracked, with dirt in the cracks and there was an open sore on his right thumb and it was dirty. Themí remembered the boy's hands and she put a cheese cracker in her mouth. She kept looking down.

"Leave the customers alone, Chuck," the flabby woman's voice came from in back of Themí. "Buy what you want and get out."

"What th' hell's wrong with you, May? Jealous or sumpin'?" Chuck left Themí's booth and walked toward the counter, bumping into a stool.

"If you don't hurry up and get out of here, I'll call up your wife to come get you." Themí turned around and smiled gratefully at the woman. She liked her then.

"Oh, fer Chrissake, I jus' want to use your goddamn john." He started for the stairs in the back of the store and stumbled on the first step. The woman laughed.

"He sure is a card," she said. "I never saw anybody that could get so drunk and still talk. Scared stiff of his wife, he is, and her just a little mite." She laughed again, and Themí smiled back, but she didn't like her now, and she wanted to leave.

"Is someone coming to get you, honey?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Themí said. "I think I'll go out and see if they're around. If anyone comes in looking for me tell them I'm down the street." Themí picked up her bag and walked out the door and down the street.

Dear God, what would I do if I were left in this place? This airless place? To these people it isn't airless—it isn't caught-between. It is a place to come to, or to go from. The sidewalk is familiar to their feet, and the buildings are familiar to their eyes, and the sounds to their ears. Other places exist for them, but they go to them from Clayton, and come back to Clayton.

But I'm here and shouldn't be. And when I'm in Clayton nothing else exists. Clayton is suspended, and I can't leave it because I don't know where to go, and I can't stay because there is nothing to stay for—nowhere to stay. She went back to the store. It was the only place she knew to go.

When she got back to the store she put down her bag and looked at her watch. It was nine-twenty. Someone whistled at her from a truck. "Want a lift, Babe?" It was Hugh, and she felt as if she were somewhere again, as if she were connected to something.

"I don't ride with strangers," she said and grinned.

He stopped the truck and got out. "Did you think I wasn't going to get here? The damn truck got stuck in the mud."

"I was afraid Meg didn't get my letter," she handed him her bag.

"And you would be stuck in the booming metropolis of Clayton, poor kid." They both laughed and Themí felt silly for the way she had felt two minutes ago, and she talked fast about nothing to Hugh on the way to the farm.

The roads were wet, and the red clay was slick and it took them a long time to get to the farm. When they got there Meg was baking pies in the kitchen and Hugh said he was glad that Themí had finally gotten there because he hadn't had any dessert in a week. Themí loved them. She loved the free, laughing feeling she got when she was with them—the feeling of space and content. She liked to talk seriously with them too, because things were serious to them, in a different way. They weren't urgent or frantic, they were soft and mulling.

That afternoon about three Themí and Meg took a walk in the fields. They walked up to the first level of a hill and they could see most of the country from there. The country was green and the red clay roads were vivid slashes in the green. Themí told Meg about the boy on the bus and waiting for Hugh at the bus stop, and Meg said she used to get frightened like that when she knew she shouldn't. She said that she used to try to think about God and Christ when she got scared like that, but it didn't help much. It helped a little when she thought of Hugh, and since they had come to the farm she had never felt that kind of fear.

They talked a long time, and it started to get windy and it began to cloud over again and the green of the fields became dark and almost blue. Meg got up to leave and turned toward the hill behind them. She started, and her face grew white. Themí turned. There was a man standing on the top of the hill and he was looking down at them. He was a dark man, his clothes were black and shabby, his face was dark and lined, and his hair was long. His clothes and his hair were blowing in the wind and the clouds moved swiftly in the sky above him. He disappeared over the top of a hill and Meg and Themí stood there staring at the place where he had been. Then Meg said, "I wonder who he is. Probably a tramp. Remind me to leave the dogs out tonight."

They didn't talk on the way home.

God and Christ. Themí thought. God, G-o-d, God. Christ, C-h-r-i-s-t. Nothing. Letters, letters put together. Meg and Hugh—Meg and Hugh are real, they are something. Fear is real like Hugh and Meg are real. Fear is the man on the hill. Fear is the woman that seduced the boy—he is the boy's father. Fear is the boy, and the drunk, and the drunk's wife, and the woman with the dirty cloth. Fear is me. Fear is real and you can touch it. No, fear is real and you can almost touch it, but it goes away. Fear is always watching from the top of the hill, and when you think he has gone away, he shows up again. I saw him, and I know he'll come back, but I saw him and that helps. It's good that I saw him.

Themí looked at Meg as they walked on the muddy red road. Everything is real to her. Everything is tangible, even the man on the hill.

The rain began again, and they started to run, and the road was slippery and they sloshed in the wet and the mud. Meg fell once, and they laughed loud through the rain. And the rain felt cool.

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